Lewis Shiner: Lizard Men of Los Angeles

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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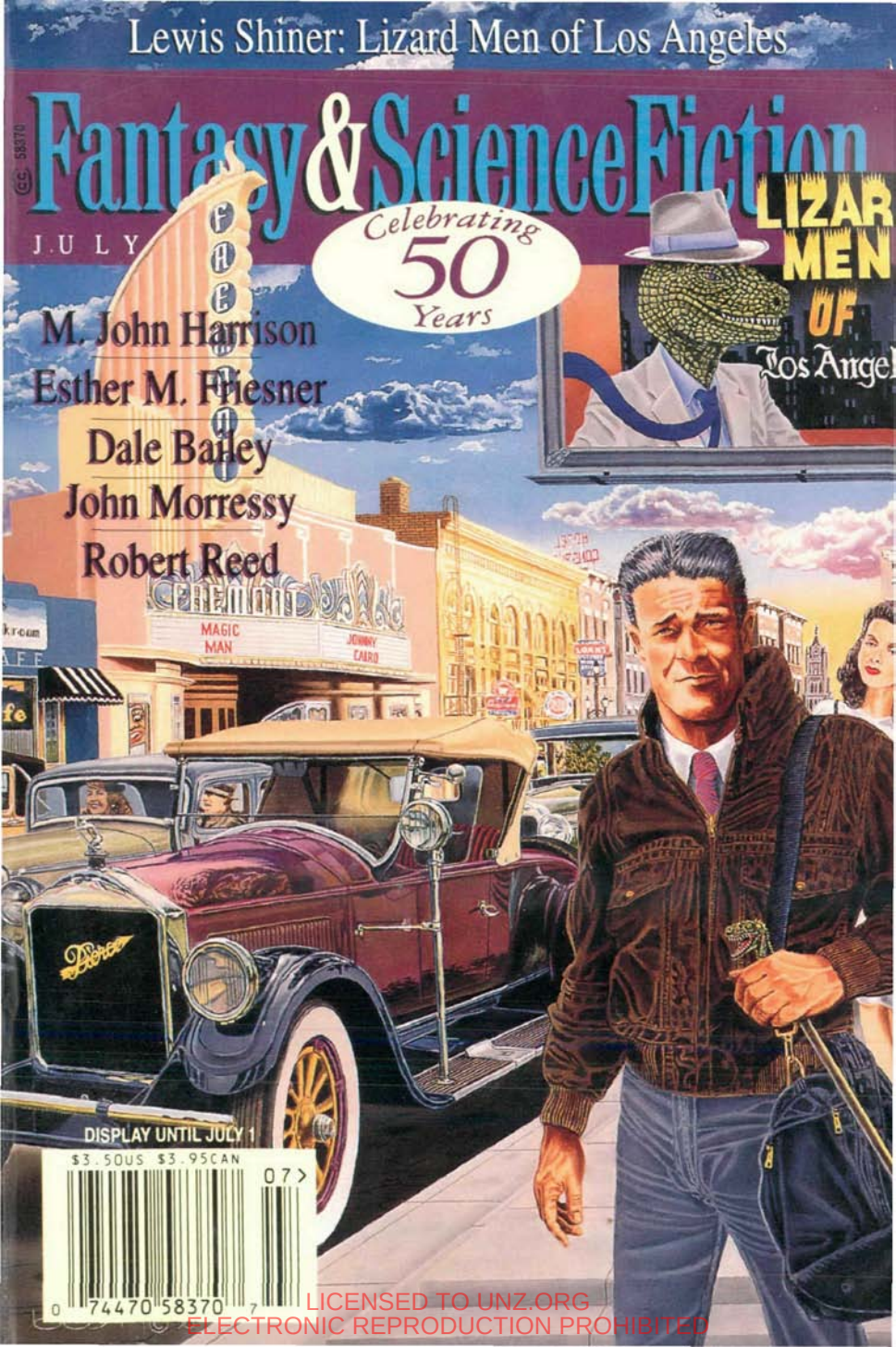
LIZARD MEN OF Los Angeles



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NOVELETS

LIZARD MEN OF LOS ANGELES 4 Lewis Shiner

WINEMASTER 104 Robert Reed

SHORT STORIES

THE RAIN AT THE END OF THE WORLD 42 Dale Bailey

FLOORED 54 John Morressy

HALLOWEEN STREET 71 Steve Rasnic Tem

WATCHING LEAR DREAM 78 Richard Paul Russo

SEA-SECTION 135 Esther M. Friesner

SUICIDE COAST 142 M. John Harrison

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 31 Charles de Lint

BOOKS 35 Douglas E. Winter

COMING ATTRACTIONS 69

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: AND I THINK TO MYSELF... 99 Paul Di Filippo

SCIENCE: MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL 129 Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy

CURIOSITIES 162 Neil Gaiman

CARTOONS: Arthur Masear (34), Bill Long (41,77), Joseph Farris (70), Tom Cheney (98), Danny Shanahan (163).

COVER BY KENT BASH FOR "LIZARD MEN OF LOS ANGELES"

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CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher

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Return to the thrilling days of yesteryear for adventure beneath the streets of Los Angeles!!!

Lewis Shiner says he has never lost his fondness for the favorite pulp writers of his youth: Burroughs, Chandler, Howard, and most especially, Lovecraft. This homage to the pulps is part of a strange novel simmering on a back burner, the working title of which is The Mystery. *But at this moment, Mr. Shiner is gearing up for the publication this Fall of his epic rock & roll novel,* Say Goodbye. *He says thanks to that scourge of saurians, his nephew Zach, for an early reading of this adventure.*

Lizard Men of Los Angeles

By Lewis Shiner

THE BEAUTIFUL BLACK-HAIRED woman suddenly turned, raised the gleaming revolver, and fired six resounding shots. Five .38 caliber slugs ripped into the wooden packing crate that Johnny Cairo had crawled into only moments before. The sixth bullet exploded a vase of red carnations that stood next to the crate.

Something slumped against the inside of the wooden box. A thread of bright crimson oozed between the pine boards and slowly trickled downward.

The woman lowered the pistol, shock and horror spreading across her elegant features. The empty revolver clattered to her feet and she took one tentative step, then another, toward the crate.

"Stop!" cried a man's voice from the back of the theater. "Don't touch that box!"

The audience turned, gasped, and broke into applause as they saw that the speaker was none other than Johnny Cairo himself, changed from his dark suit and cape to evening clothes and sporting a bright, blood-red cummerbund.

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* * *

Backstage, the entire vaudeville troupe mingled with journalists and well-wishers, though in this Depression year of 1934 the crowds were smaller than they'd ever been. When the rest had departed, one lone man remained behind. He was heavyset, with elaborate side-whiskers and thinning hair. He carried a cashmere topcoat and scarf that had attracted some notice from those exiting past him.

He approached the magician and spoke in a deep and resonant voice. "I'm sorry, but I missed the evening's...entertainment. You are Johnny Cairo? The man the press refers to as 'Mr. Impossible?'"

Cairo nodded, and gestured to the black-haired woman beside him. "This is Myra Lockhart, my associate." She had covered her revealing stage costume with a black velvet dressing gown. From a distance she had appeared to be in her twenties, but fine lines around her eyes and mouth made her true age much harder to determine. Those eyes, set in a complexion as white as cream, flashed a keen intelligence.

"Miss Lockhart," the man said with a short bow.

"Mrs.," she replied coolly.

"Errr, yes." He paused, then inquired, "Mr. Cairo, are you entirely well?"

Cairo had closed his eyes. He too seemed much older than he had from the stage. Beneath his heavy pancake makeup he was perspiring and his complexion had taken on a yellowish hue. "It's nothing," he said. "A legacy of my travels — dengue fever, a persistent amoebae, a trace of jaundice. How may I assist you, sir?"

"My name is Emil Rosenberg. I understand that you, under certain circumstances, have been known to undertake confidential investigations."

Mrs. Lockhart interrupted. "Certain very specific circumstances."

"I seek knowledge, Mr. Rosenberg," Cairo elaborated. "My investigations are always directed toward the great Mystery."

Rosenberg shook his head. "I fear you've lost me, sir."

"Some believe life to be full of mysteries. My studies in the East — and elsewhere — have convinced me there is but One, a single web of relationships that binds everything in the universe together. It's the principle by which magic works."

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"I am not a magician, sir. And my concern is with what seems to be a single mystery, the disappearance of my daughter, Vera. The police are stymied and I'm afraid something drastic may have befallen her."

"I'm sympathetic, of course, Mr. Rosenberg," Cairo offered, "but surely this is a matter for a conventional private investigator, not someone of my particular talents."

"There are...other factors involved. Factors that I believe you might...Good Lord!" The color drained from Rosenberg's face as he pointed a shaking finger toward the hallway outside the dressing room. "There's one of them now!"

Cairo spun around to look. A sinister figure, heavily muffled in a wide-brimmed hat, raincoat, and baggy trousers, had just turned from the doorway and scuttled toward the stage door exit.

Cairo leaped to his feet, his previous semblance of weariness gone. He bolted down the corridor in feverish pursuit of the mysterious onlooker. The heavily muffled man — if man it was — slammed open the bright red stage door and banged down the metal steps outside. As Cairo emerged into the warm darkness of the Los Angeles night he saw the figure moving rapidly down the sidewalk, its body strangely contorted. It was bent at the waist, its short arms jerking convulsively, as if fighting the impulse to drop to all fours.

Only a dozen yards separated Cairo from the creature as it turned the corner onto a side street. When Cairo rounded the same corner seconds later, it had disappeared.

Mrs. Lockhart found Cairo there, staring at a scarf, hat, coat, and pants lying in the gutter. A damp, fetid smell rose from the clothing. "Methane," Cairo said. "Swamp gas."

"I suppose," Mrs. Lockhart said, "this means we'll be taking the case."

"Have you ever," Rosenberg asked, "heard the name Aleister Crowley?"

They sat in the parlor of Rosenberg's house in the community of Silver Lake, located to the north and west of Los Angeles proper. Rosenberg was fortifying himself with brandy while Cairo drank strong tea. Mrs.

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Lockhart, who had changed into a low-cut black evening dress, had declined refreshment.

"The Great Beast?" Cairo asked, startled. "He's involved in this?"

"I'm afraid he may have corrupted my daughter. And I believe the creatures that have been following me — you saw one of them tonight — may be his minions. So you do know of him?"

"We have had...encounters," Mrs. Lockhart said. "He's here in Los Angeles?"

"He's staying in Pasadena, in the home of a businessman rumored to have Satanic allegiances. From there Crowley is able to make acquaintances in the film industry. Or rather, to speak frankly, to prey upon members of that profession. Spending their money on drugs and liquor, using their homes for unspeakable acts — I hope my candor doesn't offend you, sir."

"No," Cairo said. "I rely on it. And this man Crowley is worse than you imagine. How did your daughter come in contact with him?"

"She's a film actress. She uses a stage name, Veronica Fleming. Perhaps you've heard of her?" The last was said with unmistakable pride. He offered Cairo a framed color photograph from the mantle that showed a beautiful woman with luminous eyes and lustrous dark red hair falling past her shoulders.

"She was a child actress," Cairo said. "Now playing ingenue roles."

Rosenberg nodded. "She first met Crowley through her producer. I believe it's been less than a month. She began to attend parties at the mansion where Crowley's staying. Then, three days ago, she disappeared. I fear that even if she hasn't been physically harmed, her reputation may have been so damaged by her association with this...Great Beast, as you call him, that her ingenue days may be finished."

"You were right to come to us," Cairo said. "Crowley is reputed to be past his prime, but he is still one of the most dangerous men alive. As he becomes more debauched and decadent, in fact, it becomes ever more dangerous to trifle with him." He got to his feet and adjusted the cuffs of his jacket. "If you have an address for him, in fact, we'll be on our way."

"My chauffeur will drive you," Rosenberg said. "Make whatever use of him you require." He looked at his pocket watch. "However, it's nearly midnight. Surely..."

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"Crowley will be awake," Cairo assured him. "Hesitation at this point could be fatal."

"Besides," Mrs. Lockhart added, "our vaudeville troupe has an engagement in San Diego in less than twenty-four hours."

THE HOUSE had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, its long, shingled walls blending almost invisibly with the heavily landscaped grounds, its roof beams extending beyond the structure like a draftsman's energetic pencil lines. Every light in the mansion burned brightly and the driveway was filled with cars.

"Such physical beauty," Cairo remarked, "so full of corruption."

"I trust you're not waxing metaphorical," Mrs. Lockhart said. "You know how I feel about that." They walked up the curving driveway together and Cairo tried the massive teak door. It was securely locked and bolted. Cairo paused momentarily to pick the locks, then led them through a long entry hall into a scene of utter debauchery.

Perhaps two dozen men, women, and children sprawled in various postures throughout the large, oak-paneled room. None of them was Victoria Fleming. Few were fully dressed; some were bound with scarves or leather. They were grouped, for the most part, in twos and threes, with most of the possible combinations of gender represented. A blazing fire kept the room uncomfortably warm. On low tables throughout lay syringes, liquor bottles, and untidy heaps of white powders.

A low divan in the center of the room held a tall, sturdily built man in his fifties, his head shaved, his thick jowls sagging with mindless pleasure. He was completely naked.

"Crowley!" Cairo shouted.

The bald man's eyes slowly opened and focused upon Cairo. "You!" he cried. His stare exuded malevolence. "How dare you confront me here?"

Mrs. Lockhart turned to Cairo. "If everything is under control here, I'll just have a look at the rest of the house."

Without looking away from Crowley, Cairo nodded. "Excellent suggestion."

"What are you doing here, Cairo?" Crowley bellowed, slowly rising

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to a sitting position, but making no attempt to cover himself. "You and that bloodless imitation of a woman? What do you want from me?"

"Information, merely," Cairo said. "I'm looking for a woman named Veronica Fleming. She might also call herself Vera Rosenberg. We have reason to believe you might know her."

"Or have knowledge of her?" Crowley smiled. "In the so-called Biblical sense, perhaps? Do not waste my time, Cairo. There are so many women. Sometimes they are masked or blindfolded, and I never even see their faces, let alone learn their names. They are all one to me. Merely vessels for the transmission of magickal power."

"It's not your childish blasphemy that I object to," Cairo observed evenly. "Nor your physical depravity, nor even your wretched verse. It is your lack of compassion. It renders you less than human, and beneath contempt."

Crowley colored at the mention of his poetry, but quickly regained control. "You are so sanctimonious, Cairo." He waved one massive, long-fingered hand dismissively. "Yet you and I are two sides of the same coin. I debauch young women to feed my self-esteem, you rescue them to the same end. You focus your will through your 'craft' and your petty conjurings, I focus mine through ritual and tantric practice, but both of us know that will is the key. 'Do what thou wilt — '"

"'— shall be the whole of the Law,'" Cairo intoned. "So you have told us, again and again."

"You weary me, Cairo. Begone."

Mrs. Lockhart had not yet returned. Cairo glanced at his watch. "I dispute your comparisons," he said. "We are separate coins, and yours is made of base metal, counterfeit."

Crowley, in a show of indifference, put a pinch of white powder on the web of his left thumb and inhaled it briskly. From one of the darkened corners of the room came a sharp cry, though whether of pain or pleasure was not immediately obvious.

"And whatever else may be true of me," Cairo persisted, "I can at least console myself that I am not the author of poetry so wretched that it is universally reviled in my lifetime and will be forgotten promptly thereafter."

This, at last, reduced Crowley to rage. "Hasan!" he screamed in a

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high- pitched voice. A young Arab in an embroidered galabeya and turban appeared, carrying a scimitar.

Crowley pointed to Cairo. "Kill him!"

Cairo, with an expression of distaste, let his gaze wander around the room. He took three strides to the fireplace where he hefted the brass poker. "Mmmm," he said with some dissatisfaction, and extended the implement from a practiced fencer's stance.

Suddenly wary, Hasan, who had raised his scimitar and seemed to be on the point of charging, glanced nervously at Crowley. "Kill him!" Crowley shrieked again, and the young Arab inched forward, twirling the blade with a circular motion of his wrist. Cairo gave way before it, passing behind a sofa from which two scantily-clad women regarded him with mild interest.

Hasan lunged and swung the curved blade in a murderous arc. Cairo somehow stepped out of its path, letting it carry on unimpeded into a priceless white Chinese vase, which shattered into a hundred fragments. Glancing behind him, Cairo's eyes fell upon a heavily-laden coffee table, and he reached back with his left foot to kick it aside. Powders, liquids, and candles flew across the room in a graceful arc and a teenage boy, who'd been reaching for one of the bowls, let out a sigh of regret.

Another furious scimitar slash failed to connect, reducing Hasan to blind fury. He became a windmill of flashing steel and yet Cairo remained untouched as the young Arab hurtled past him, colliding with a love seat and sending himself and its occupants sprawling across the deep red Oriental carpet of the adjacent dining room.

Stumbling to his feet, Hasan hurled a massive chair at Cairo, who ducked it easily. "Damn you," Crowley shouted at the boy. "Can you not finish him?"

Hasan moved in with the sword again, backing Cairo toward a corner. The boy's confidence was gone and he fought with the desperate intensity of the hopeless. His blade clashed with Cairo's poker once, twice, a third time, and then Cairo said, "Ah. There you are."

With a fluid motion he sent the scimitar spinning out of Hasan's grip, leaving the boy with a purpling bruise across the back of his hand.

Mrs. Lockhart, who had reappeared from the back of the house, stood

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in the center of the room, staring at the upturned furniture and the shattered vase and bowls. "Shall we?" she asked Cairo.

"Indeed," Cairo replied, and he saluted Crowley with the poker before tossing it into the fireplace. "If you'll forgive us, we'll take our leave."

"I will curse you, Cairo," Crowley muttered. "Carefully, elaborately, and inescapably. You will regret this. Briefly, in the time that remains to you."

"Do what thou wilt," Cairo said, and extended his arm to Mrs. Lockhart.

As they walked down the driveway Mrs. Lockhart said, "No sign of Veronica Fleming, but I did find an acquaintance of hers. She claims that her name is Blanche. I assisted her escape through a window, and she's now waiting for us in the car."

Mrs. Lockhart walked around to the front passenger seat while Cairo got in back next to a thin, pale woman with limp ash-blonde hair. She wore a low-cut evening dress of white satin. "Blanche, indeed," Cairo smiled. "What's your real name?"

After a long pause the woman lifted her pale eyes and said, "Mildred. Mildred Davis. Of Hillsboro, Missouri."

"Drive," Mrs. Lockhart said to the chauffeur. "Back toward Los Angeles."

"You know Veronica Fleming?" Cairo asked the girl.

"I should think I know her. She stole my boyfriend." In contrast to her fashionable appearance, her voice was uneducated and somewhat shrill.

Cairo raised one eyebrow and the girl continued. "The first time she come to the house, I couldn't even believe it, her being in pictures and all. I used to watch her back in Hillsboro when she was just a little girl. She's one of the reasons I come out here to Hollywood. Brother Perdurabo was going to make me a star just like her." Cairo frowned at the name Perdurabo, one of Crowley's many aliases. "Then," the girl went on, "she went and moved in on my Bruno."

"Bruno?" Cairo asked.

"Bruno Galt. He's a geologist. Works for one of those big mining companies. He's got piles of money. Brother Perdurabo was going to teach Bruno the Art, so he give me to Bruno for his, you know, those tantrum rituals?"

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"Tantric," Cairo said.

"That's the ones. Then three days ago Veronica, she puts the moves on Bruno and he leaves the mansion with her. That was the last time I seen either one of them."

"Do you know where Galt lives?"

"I should think I do. He's got a place downtown." She gave the driver an address on Grand Avenue.

"As quickly as you can," Cairo told him. The driver nodded, made a right turn, and accelerated into the eastbound traffic on Huntington Drive. Cairo turned back to the girl. "What makes a geologist so interested in the occult?"

"It's this guy he works with. Warren Shufelt. He's a mining engineer."

"Another of Crowley's benefactors?"

"As far as I know, Mr. Shufelt don't got nothing to do with Brother Perdurabo. He's only interested in his tunnels."

"Tunnels?"

"Yeah, the tunnels that — "

She broke off as a police siren suddenly split the night. Red lights flashed through the rear windscreen. The chauffeur slowed the car and steered toward the side of the road. Cairo leaned forward. "I'll handle this."

A policeman ran up to the car as Cairo wound down the rear window. "Your name Cairo?" the patrolman asked.

Cairo nodded.

"Follow us," the man called, already running back to his own vehicle. "There's trouble at Mr. Rosenberg's."

When they arrived at Rosenberg's house three police cars already sat in the driveway, red lights flashing. Cairo sprang out of the limousine and one of the policemen led him toward the house, with Mildred and Mrs. Lockhart following closely behind.

"There was a break-in," the policeman said. "Mr. Rosenberg asked us to put out an all-points for you. He said he needed to talk to you right away, and when Mr. Rosenberg needs something, well, we try to oblige him."

"I'm sure," Cairo said.

Rosenberg awaited them in his sun room, wearing a heavy terrycloth

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robe and drinking coffee. He was pacing back and forth in front of the sliding glass doors that led to his swimming pool. His hair was damp and he seemed feverish.

Cairo sat in a wicker chair. As soon as Mildred and Mrs. Lockhart had settled themselves on the divan he said, "Tell us what happened."

"I was fast asleep," Rosenberg explained. "I awoke when I felt the covers pulled away from me, and I sat up in bed. I caught just a glimpse of one of those creatures standing over me, and then it doused me in some kind of liquid."

"Can you describe the liquid?" Mrs. Lockhart asked, leaning forward.

"It was greenish and slightly oily to the touch. Thicker than water, somehow. And it had a faint, fetid smell, like a marsh."

Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart exchanged a significant look.

"I sprang out of bed," Rosenberg continued, "and caught only a glimpse of my attacker. He was small, heavily swathed — in short, almost identical to the intruder at the theater this evening. The way he moved, I tell you, sir, I'm not entirely sure he..." Rosenberg shook his head, then dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "Is it unnaturally hot in here?"

"Quite the contrary," Cairo said. "Tell me what it is you were unsure of."

Rosenberg's voice dropped to a whisper. "I am not entirely sure he was...human."

Cairo nodded. "I see. What happened next?"

"The creature disappeared into the night. I called the police immediately, of course, and then I took a hot bath and scrubbed my skin nearly raw. It had begun to itch most fearsomely. In fact," he confided, mopping his brow again, "it still does."

Suddenly Rosenberg stood stock still. "My God — " he said.

Cairo got to his feet. "Rosenberg? Is something wrong?"

Rosenberg's only reply was a high-pitched moan that seemed to escape involuntarily from his lips.

Cairo looked at Mrs. Lockhart. "What's wrong with him? Do you see anything?"

Mrs. Lockhart shook her head but Mildred suddenly gasped and put her hand to her mouth. "L-look!"

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Cairo turned back. Faint wisps of smoke had begun to rise from Rosenberg's robe.

"What's going on?" Mildred cried.

"Open those glass doors, Mrs. Lockhart, if you please," Cairo said with icy calm.

"Hellllllllp...meeeeeeee..." Rosenberg howled, as the first tiny flames began to flicker at the back of his head, like an infernal halo. The very air around him had begun to warp from the intense heat that poured off his body.

Cairo reached one hand toward Rosenberg, then snatched it back. There now seemed to be a fire deep inside Rosenberg's chest, like the glow inside a piece of charcoal whose surface has turned to ash. In fact, Rosenberg's skin had begun to flutter away in small, gray sheets.

Mrs. Lockhart wrestled open one of the massive glass doors and stood aside as Cairo snatched a Navajo rug from the tile floor and, using it as a shield, attempted to wrap it around Rosenberg's body. At that instant Rosenberg burst into flames as hot as those in a crematorium. The blanket was consumed instantly and Cairo fell back with his hands before his face.

When he got to his feet, nothing remained of Emil Rosenberg but a pile of ashes and one charred gray foot.

A POLICEMAN burst through the door with a revolver in his hand. "What's going on here?" He glanced nervously around the room. "Where's Mr. Rosenberg? And what's that smell?"

Cairo faced him, his eyes intent. He held up his right hand, middle finger bent and held by the thumb, the remaining fingers extended. "Listen to my voice," Cairo intoned. "There is nothing wrong here. You will give us the keys to your patrol car. You will walk us to the car and explain to the others that I am a high-ranking member of the Los Angeles police department."

The policeman's eyes clouded over and his brow furrowed as if he were studying a complex mathematical formula. "Nothing's wrong here. You can put your badge away, sir. My car is right outside."

Mildred looked at Mrs. Lockhart in amazement. "How did he do that?"

"A very great deal of self-confidence," Mrs. Lockhart replied. "Don't dawdle."

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The officer escorted them to his car and waved to them from the driveway as Mrs. Lockhart expertly backed the long, black automobile, lights still flashing, into the street. Cairo turned to Mildred, who sat wide-eyed in the back. "First we need directions to Galt's apartment," he said. "Then I want you to finish telling me about the tunnels."

The night was dark and cool and the stars burned fiercely overhead as Mrs. Lockhart drove toward the city. Mildred's face, in the starlight, showed a mixture of fear and excitement, innocence and cupidity. "Mr. Shufelt, see, he had this idea about a lost city under Los Angeles. He thought there was gold down there, big tablets of it — I guess like Moses had, only gold. He said he had maps that he made with what he called his Radio X-Ray. It just looked like a fancy dowsing rod to me, but what do I know? He drilled a big hole on Fort Moore Hill this spring trying to find it."

"I assume he was unsuccessful," Cairo said. "Otherwise it would have been in every newspaper in the civilized world."

"Bruno says he *did* find it."

"Then perhaps we should be talking to this Shufelt instead of Galt."

"I don't think even Brother Perdurabo could talk to Mr. Shufelt now."

"Are you saying he's dead?"

"The city gave up drilling, see, on account of being scared the hole was going to cave in, even though Mr. Shufelt said they were almost through. So Bruno and Mr. Shufelt went out there one night and Bruno lowered him into the hole with his Radio X-Ray machine and a pickax. Bruno stayed up top to watch for cops and all, and after three or four hours Mr. Shufelt said he found something. Then Bruno heard Mr. Shufelt say something like, 'Oh my God, they're alive!' Then there was this awful noise that Bruno said was like bones going through a grinder and the bottom part of the tunnel fell in. By the time Bruno could get down there, there was a hundred tons of rock where Mr. Shufelt had been."

"Did Bruno go to the police?"

The girl nodded. "He says they didn't believe him. They thought it was just a trick so they'd let Bruno and Mr. Shufelt start drilling again."

"Do you have any idea what Mr. Shufelt might have meant when he said, 'They're alive'?"

"Bruno thought he knew. He thought — "

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"Yes?"

She looked out the window, then back into Cairo's eyes. "He thought it was the lizard men."

"See," Mildred explained, the words rushing out now in a torrent, "the tunnels are all supposed to connect together in the shape of this giant lizard. The head is up by Chinatown and the tail is down by the Central Library. There's some kind of Indian legend about it. It was supposed to be built by lizard people five thousand years ago."

"The lizard people are real," Cairo said. "We saw one of them at the theater this evening, and it was one of them that attacked Rosenberg at his house. But what was Veronica's part in all of this?"

"She was real interested in those gold tablets. See, Bruno, he was sure there was another way into the tunnels. He was telling me about it at the mansion, about how he had all of Mr. Shufelt's maps and everything, and about how he thought Brother Perdurabo could help him find the entrance. That's when Veronica made her move. I bet she convinced Bruno she'd be better at that tantric stuff than me."

"The maps are at Galt's apartment?"

"He used to show them to me. I tell you, I don't understand half the things he'd say to me, and those maps ain't like any maps I ever saw." She leaned forward and said to Mrs. Lockhart, "Turn right on Grand Avenue, and go slow. We're almost there."

Mrs. Lockhart parked the police cruiser on the nearly deserted street and killed the lights. Downtown Los Angeles was a gray place, nothing like the outlying cities with their palm trees and ocean views. Cairo hunched his shoulders slightly as Mildred led them into a Spanish-style apartment building that had seen more prosperous days. No one answered the buzzer labeled "B. Galt," so they climbed the stairs to the third floor, where Cairo opened the door as easily as if it hadn't been locked.

The apartment consisted of a living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen: red tile floors, arched doorways, white plaster walls, and ceiling fans. The Spartan furnishings included no paintings, plants, or knickknacks. Two glasses sat in the kitchen sink, one of them showing lipstick traces, and a handbag lay on the rug beside the couch. Mrs. Lockhart made a quick inspection of its contents. "It's Veronica's," she said.

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A drafting table stood against the far wall of the bedroom. Cairo shuffled through the neat stacks of paper and said, "Come look at this."

A map of downtown Los Angeles was taped to the surface of the table, onto which three vellum overlays had been added. Several hundred short lines crisscrossed the top layer. The second layer showed several longer, more complex lines, one of them winding through El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park downtown.

The third overlay contained the outlines of a lizard, resembling the Gila monster of Arizona. Its head stretched north of Chinatown and its straight, stubby tail terminated at the Los Angeles Central Library, only a few blocks from where they stood.

"That's the map," Mildred said. "Crazy, ain't it?"

"The lizard I understand — more or less," Mrs. Lockhart said. "The other two diagrams baffle me."

Cairo shook his head. "Mildred, did Bruno ever say anything that might make sense of all this?"

She shook her head. "I don't think he understood it so much himself. That's why he was going to Brother Perdurabo."

"We'll search all the rooms," Cairo said. "There must be something else here to — "

At that moment the front door of the apartment flew open with a crash. A dark figure stood in the hallway, silhouetted by the hall light.

"Bruno?" Mildred said.

The figure groaned and toppled face-first onto the floor.

Cairo rolled the man onto his back. He had an athletic build, short blond hair, and wire-rimmed glasses. One lens had shattered and his khaki work clothes were bloodied and torn. "Is this Bruno?" Cairo asked Mildred.

Mildred nodded, wide-eyed. "Is he...?"

"Alive at the moment," Cairo said. "But not at all well."

"Lizard men..." Bruno whispered.

"Easy," Cairo warned. "We have to get you to a hospital."

"No time," Bruno whispered. "I'm...a walking dead man...have to warn...lizard men...on the move...kill us all...take back their city..." His eyes suddenly opened wide. "Lizard queen! Must stop...the lizard queen!"

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"Where are they?" Cairo asked intently. "These lizard men, how do we find them?"

"To...the tunnels...from...the tunnels..."

Cairo looked to Mrs. Lockhart. "He's making no sense. If you'd be so kind as to get his feet, perhaps we — " He broke off as waves of heat began to pour off of Bruno's body.

"Lizard!" Bruno screamed. "Queeeeeeeeeeeen!"

"Oh no," Cairo sighed. "Not again."

Flames leaped out of Bruno's clothing and the glass of his spectacles melted and ran like tears. The skull inside Bruno's head seemed to glow as if made of molten lava.

"Your hands," Mrs. Lockhart said sharply. "Where you touched him."

Cairo looked down. Smoke was already rising from his skin.

"I'll get ice," Mrs. Lockhart said, moving swiftly to the icebox in the kitchen. Cairo ignored her. He backed away from Bruno's furiously burning body and lowered himself into a cross-legged posture on the floor. He closed his eyes. Flames flickered between his fingers and then, just as suddenly, died out. A moment later Cairo opened his eyes and inspected the hands he held out in front of him, unharmed.

"There's no ice," Mrs. Lockhart said, returning. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly," Cairo assured her.

"How...how..." Mildred stammered.

"It was no worse than the hot coals I used to walk upon in India. Any *fakir* could have done the same."

"You...you were faking it?" She burst into sudden tears. "I don't understand any of this! This is all so horrible! Poor Bruno, and poor Mr. Rosenberg! And that monster, Crowley, who wanted to have relations with anything that moved! I wish I never came to California! I wish none of this had ever happened!"

"Listen to my voice," Cairo said. He held up his hand, palm first, with the middle finger bent again. "I will not command you to forget, because if you forget you will only make the same mistakes again. And I cannot undo the things that happened tonight. I can, however, make you able to remember them without much pain, or fear, or curiosity, so that you can go back to Missouri and be Mildred Davis once again. Do you understand?"

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Mildred nodded and Cairo lowered his hand. "Do you have any money?" he asked her. She shook her head. Cairo reached into the limp blonde hair behind her ear and produced a small, tightly folded piece of paper. He carefully unfolded it to reveal a twenty-dollar bill. "That should get you home," he said.

Mildred wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Help me search for another map," Cairo said, "before we take you to the train station."

DAWN WAS a pale gray promise in the eastern sky when they pulled up in front of Union Station on Alameda Street. Even at this hour the sidewalks teemed with well-dressed travelers, while children sold newspapers and fresh fruit. The smell of oranges blended with the scent of orange blossoms in the air.

They had searched Bruno's apartment top to bottom and found no other maps than the ones on the drafting table. Cairo had appropriated those, along with a massive battery-powered miner's lamp they'd found in Bruno's closet.

They got out of the police car. "Thank you so much, Mr. Cairo, Mrs. Lockhart," Mildred said. "I don't know how I could ever pay you back."

"Just take care of yourself," Cairo said. He reached into thin air and pulled back a business card. "This is the address of our manager. Write us a letter when you're safely back in Missouri."

"I will."

"A moment," Mrs. Lockhart said suddenly. "Mildred, what's that?"

She was pointing to a ramp, paved with cobblestones, that led down into the ground. "That?" Mildred said. "Why, that's just a walkway, for people and horses to cross the street."

"Are there many of them in the city?"

"Maybe a couple of hundred."

"As many," Mrs. Lockhart pressed on, "as there were little marks on the top sheet of Bruno's map? Cairo, would you be so kind?" He nodded, reached back into the police car for the map, and unrolled it on the sidewalk.

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"You're right," Cairo said. "It's a map of the pedestrian tunnels. Very astute, Mrs. Lockhart."

"There's more," Mrs. Lockhart said. "Note how these pedestrian tunnels connect with a longer tunnel that goes under the park? That park right behind us?"

"By heaven," Cairo said. "I think you're on to it." He rolled up the maps and exchanged them for the miner's lamp. "What did Bruno say when I asked him how to find the lizard men? Could it have been that he meant us to get '*to* the tunnels' — meaning the tunnels of the lizard men — '*from* the tunnels' — meaning from the pedestrian tunnels?"

"Let us find out," Mrs. Lockhart said. "Mildred, can you make your way to your train on your own?"

"Compared to a lot of things I done since I came out here," Mildred said, "it'll be a piece of cake."

She blew a kiss, and Cairo managed a short bow, then he and Mrs. Lockhart turned and hurried down the ramp that led to the tunnels under Los Angeles.

The short tunnel crossed beneath Alameda and emerged again at the end of Olvera Street in the park. Cairo walked the length of it then returned, searching the walls and floor. "I don't see any way this can join the other tunnel."

"That's because," Mrs. Lockhart said, "you're using your eyes."

Cairo stopped. "You're right, of course." He produced a long, red handkerchief from his sleeve and tied it over his eyes. Once again he slowly walked the length of the tunnel, arms raised slightly from his sides, turning his head every few seconds to listen or to sniff the air. An elderly Mexican woman, muffled in a black dress and shawl, passed him with a frightened look, crossing herself and muttering under her breath.

Once she had climbed the ramp to the park Cairo asked, "Are we alone?"

"Quite," Mrs. Lockhart replied.

Cairo nodded, walked to the middle of the south wall of the tunnel, and ran his fingers carefully over the massive stone blocks. "Ah," he said, and a section of the wall pivoted backward into darkness. He removed the blindfold and switched on Bruno's mining lamp. Sniffing the air of the

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passage he commented, "Methane. Volatile stuff. Don't light up one of your cigars in here, Mrs. Lockhart."

"Very droll, Cairo. If you don't wish to lead, I'll be happy to oblige."

Cairo handed her the lamp and followed her into the passage. The tunnel was ten feet high and nearly that wide, paved with large, uniform stones. The scars of pickaxes were visible in the rock of the ceiling. Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart had advanced no more than a few paces when the section of wall that had pivoted to admit them rumbled slowly back into place.

Mrs. Lockhart looked at Cairo. "I trust you'll be able to get us out again."

"I hope so too," Cairo smiled. "Lead on."

The passage ran straight and unencumbered for several hundred yards, angling slightly downward. Suddenly Cairo halted. "Mrs. Lockhart. Shut the lamp off, if you would."

She did so, and for a moment they were plunged into what seemed to be absolute, stygian darkness. Then, after a few agonizing seconds, a faint, yellowish-green outline emerged from the general gloom of the floor. Cairo knelt and lifted away a stone trap-door, revealing a drop of ten feet or so, with hand-holds in the rock, and a stone staircase below it that led deep into the bowels of the earth. The green glow rose from the stairs.

Mrs. Lockhart handed the lamp to Cairo and began to descend. "Be careful," she said. "It's a bit slippery."

Cairo passed down the lamp and joined her on the first platform. "Are you prepared to go on?" Cairo asked. "I have no idea where this may lead."

A narrow smile barely registered on Mrs. Lockhart's agelessly beautiful features. "That lack has never stopped me before."

The stairs seemed to have been carved from living rock, untold generations before. The risers were over a foot in height and the uncomfortably narrow treads were well worn. The passage curved gently to the right as it descended. After the initial turning, Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart continued straight downward in a northwesterly direction for hundreds of feet before abruptly emerging into a chamber the size of a banquet hall with a smooth, level floor. The mysterious green glow came from a single sphere, somewhat larger than a man's head, in the center of the ceiling. It provided enough light to easily read the carvings in the walls of the cave.

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Interspersed with vaguely humanoid figures were rows of hieroglyphs. Cairo took the lamp and studied them.

"Remind you of anything?" Mrs. Lockhart asked.

"The Temple of Ramses the Second at Abu Simbel," Cairo returned, awe in his voice.

Mrs. Lockhart nodded. "And...?"

"And Chichen Itza in the Yucatan."

"Exactly."

"But if there is a single civilization that bridges those two cultures, it must mean — "

"Correct," Mrs. Lockhart said. "These tunnels can only have been built by the survivors of Atlantis."

Cairo stood for a moment, as if trying to fathom all the implications of the idea. "Are you saying that the Atlanteans were not human? That they were some sort of...lizard race?" Cairo turned slowly, taking in the carvings, the alien technology of the light sphere. "It could explain so much...."

He froze. "Did you hear something?"

Mrs. Lockhart shook her head once, a curt gesture that barely disturbed her jet-black hair.

Another tunnel led from the far end of the chamber. Cairo glided silently toward the opening and looked into the darkness. "I don't think — "

This time the noise was clearly audible, a sort of wet thump. It was quickly followed by another. Cairo backed into the center of the room and held the lamp high. Mrs. Lockhart moved behind him, crouching slightly, her arms raised in the posture of an oriental science of self-defense.

A panel of hieroglyphs suddenly slid open to reveal a small passageway, followed almost instantly by a second panel and then a third. A fourth opened in the opposite wall, then two more. For a moment silence fell on the underground chamber, an absence more terrifying than the sounds that had preceded it.

And then the openings poured forth lizard men.

There were at least a hundred of them, all about four feet in height, their skins gray-green in the eerie luminescence. Their loins were wrapped

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in some sort of bindings that left room for the massive tails that dragged the ground behind them. They had almost no necks, and their lipless mouths extended more than an inch beyond where their noses should have been. Their bulbous eyes stared unblinkingly as they shambled forward on massive lower legs that bent nearly double. Had they straightened those legs they would have been the height of a man.

They formed a great circle around Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart. The odor of methane in the air was almost unbearable. Cairo shifted the lamp to his left hand and gestured with his right. "We are looking for a human woman, Veronica Fleming. We have no desire to harm you."

"Speak for yourself, Cairo," Mrs. Lockhart said. "In any case, I don't believe they're listening."

The lizard men had begun to move forward. "I will protect myself," Cairo warned them, waving the lamp in an arc in front of him. "Have a care."

The lizard men charged.

Cairo swung the lamp once, grazing one of them and tracing a line of dark green across its chest. He had no further opportunity. In the next moment the weight of the creatures bore him and Mrs. Lockhart to the floor of the cave and consciousness fled from them both.

Cairo recovered to find himself leaning back against one face of a steep, ten-foot-tall pyramid, his wrists and ankles secured by golden chains. He winced in pain as soon as he opened his eyes and it took him a moment to try again.

"Are you all right, Cairo?" Mrs. Lockhart asked. She was chained to a second pyramid a few yards away.

"Somewhat the worse for beating," he said, "but I hope to survive." He blinked, raised his head, and gasped in astonishment as he looked around.

They'd been brought to a huge underground chamber, larger than any cathedral in Europe. A massive green globe seemed to hang well below the vaulted ceiling, where it blazed with a light to rival the noonday sun. Pyramids, altars, and figurines rose from the smooth stone floor at irregular intervals. Surrounding them swarmed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the lizard creatures. Many of them carried spears that appeared

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to be tipped with gold. And on a dais in front of Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart stood a woman in long, flowing white robes and a golden mask.

Cairo smiled. "Veronica Fleming, I presume?"

The woman moved to the edge of the dais. She was but a few paces away from Cairo, had he been able to move, her waist on a level with his eyes. "No," she said, and removed the mask. "I was never Veronica Fleming."

Rosenberg's daughter stood revealed before them, her haunted eyes and shining red hair appearing almost black in the mysterious light. "Veronica Fleming was a creation of my father's, the invention of a status-seeking, fame-obsessed immigrant ashamed of his own heritage. It was Veronica Fleming who was sold into the child slavery of the studio system, Veronica Fleming who was given drugs and liquor before she even became physically a woman, Veronica Fleming who was used by producers and directors and has-been actors. Not me. Never me."

She spread her arms wide above her head, fingers extended. "I am Vera Rosenberg, and I have found my true destiny...as a Queen." Her subjects answered her with percussive sounds from their throats, horrid gulping barks that resounded the length and breadth of the chamber and built to a deafening crescendo.

"What do you mean to do with us?" Cairo demanded, his voice raised to be heard above the hideous cacophony.

"You will be sacrificed, of course," Vera said. "In due time."

"Three days ago," Mrs. Lockhart said, "you stood in the same relation to Aleister Crowley, the Great Beast 666, that Veronica Fleming stood to her Hollywood masters. How did your situation change so utterly in so short a time?"

"The span of time is not three days," Vera said, "but rather five thousand years. I am the fulfillment of ancient prophecy." She beckoned to four of the nearest lizard creatures. "Leave them chained, but release them to walk about."

"So your subjects speak English?" Cairo asked, as his manacles were unfastened from the pyramid, the loose ends of the chains held by shambling lizard guards.

"English, Latin, Hebrew — all of your warm-blood languages are descended from those of my people."

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"Your people, then," Mrs. Lockhart commented, "would be the cold-bloods?"

"Your reputation has preceded you, Mrs. Lockhart," Vera said. "You are hardly one to cast aspersions on cold-bloodedness." She smiled without humor. "But I will give you some few answers before your deaths. The rituals are more effective if the victims have some understanding of their purpose."

She walked gracefully down the steps of the dais and swept her arm toward a monumental sculpture which had the same Gila-monster form as the underground complex itself on Shufelt's map. It stretched a hundred yards in length, some thirty feet in height, and its surface was formed of beaten gold. At Vera Rosenberg's gesture, an opening appeared in the side of the giant reptile.

"Clearly," Cairo murmured to Mrs. Lockhart, "she may have shed her former identity, but she hasn't lost her flair for the dramatic." One of the lizard men responded by jabbing him in the kidneys with the blunt end of a spear.

"In this chamber," Vera said, "are thirty-seven golden tablets." She snapped her fingers and two of the lizard men scuttled into the chamber then reappeared, awkwardly carrying one of the tablets between them. The tablet had the rudimentary form of a lizard, with abbreviated head, tail, and legs breaking the otherwise oblong form. It appeared to be a slab of solid gold four feet in length, a little more than a foot wide, and perhaps half an inch thick. The upper surface was covered in hieroglyphs similar to those in the outer chamber.

"If the information inscribed on these tablets became public knowledge," Vera said, "it would destroy your civilization. Together they contain the entire history of the world since its creation, and believe me, its creation is nothing at all like you imagine it to be. They tell of the origin of warm-blooded life as an experiment gone awry. They even predict the coming of a warm-blooded, red-haired woman in the fifth millennium of exile to lead them back to domination of the surface world."

"You've read them all in three days?" Mrs. Lockhart remarked. "You've been busy."

"Your sarcasm is wasted," Vera replied imperiously. "Fragments of this knowledge have escaped over the centuries. Hopi legends tell of the

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great lost cities of the Lizard Clan. Bruno Galt heard of the Lizard Queen from a Hopi medicine man that they'd hired to help with their research. When Bruno and I met, we were two ambitious people who quickly saw how we could benefit from one another."

"Bruno's dead," Cairo said.

"Yes. He could never see past the gold. He didn't realize that gold was meaningless once you had the power to rule an entire city — perhaps an entire continent. The power to repay anyone who had ever hurt you."

"Then you must know your father is dead as well."

"I ordered it."

"We watched both of them die," Cairo told her, "terrifying and painful deaths. Both were incinerated before our eyes."

Vera nodded again. "It is our preferred means of execution: the Blood of the Green Lion."

Cairo's eyes widened at the name. "The universal solvent," he murmured, "that the alchemists have always spoken of. It dissolves the seven metals and gold. How can you transport it?"

"Your warm-blood alchemists were wrong. Gold contains it, if the gold is pure enough. Our scientists developed it in the days when we ruled the surface world. Simply douse any object and gradually, in the space of half an hour or so, the energy within the molecules of that object releases itself as heat. We used the Blood of the Green Lion to melt these tunnels. Because gold can resist this chemical process, it became sacred to our people. As you can see, we've accumulated a good deal of it."

She seemed to drift into a kind of reverie. "The race has fallen off greatly since then. Rapid evolution is both a blessing and a curse. But in a few generations — mere decades in human terms — I know we can rise again."

She turned to back to Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart. Her smile at last appeared more genuine. "I realize you've only scratched the surface of the knowledge we have to offer you, but I fear we must break off. It's time for you to die."

Lizard soldiers stretched Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart on two adjacent altars, securing their chains to the stone. On a third altar lay the heavy mining lamp. Two further lizard disciples staggered into view carrying a

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massive golden urn between them. They set it at the foot of the altars and stepped away.

"That would be the Blood of the Green Lion?" Cairo asked. "You mean, then, to burn us to death?"

"That is correct, Mr. Cairo. But your deaths will inspire my people to their conquest of the surface world, so you will not die completely in vain."

"I take it," Mrs. Lockhart ventured, "that no one has actually used this chemical here, underground, in quite some time?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," Cairo explained, "these tunnels are full of methane. The ground under Los Angeles is notoriously unstable, and clearly a fissure has opened some deposit of the gas. There may be other natural gases present as well which are not so easily recognizable, and even more flammable. In any event, an open flame in this chamber will result in an explosion of epic proportions."

Vera's face registered her concern. One of the lizard men tugged at her robe and she bent over to listen to his hoarse, croaking voice.

Cairo raised his right hand as far as the chains would allow and pinned his middle finger with his thumb. "You must believe me," he said intently. "We are all in danger. You must release us now and let us return to the surface."

Vera dismissed him with a shake of her magnificent red hair. "Before poor Bruno showed me my destiny, I had planned to achieve my independence by means of Brother Perdurabo's techniques. I learned enough from him to resist such feeble parlor tricks as yours, Cairo." She clapped her hands. "Cover them with the Blood! When you have finished, we will begin the rite of war. As they burn, they will light our charge to the surface world and the restoration of our empire!"

Two lizard men carefully raised the urn onto a pedestal. A third held a golden bowl to a tap at the bottom of the urn and filled it with a viscous liquid. Vera mounted a second pedestal near the urn from which she could look down upon the sacrificial altars. The creature carrying the golden bowl held it high overhead and the chamber resounded again to the yelping cries of the lizard men, as bone-chilling a sound as ever heard by human ears.

Cairo shrank from the creature as it mounted the steps of the altar,

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still carrying the bowl held high. Cairo's two hands were clasped together, his knees drawn up as far as his chains would permit. From the lizard's bulbous throat came a high-pitched warbling moan. A dozen more lizards took up the sound, then a hundred, then a thousand, until the very bedrock seemed to quiver and shake.

"Now!" Vera screamed. "Cover him now!"

Cairo seemed frozen. The lizard began to lower the bowl. The cries of the lizard army reached a feverish climax. And suddenly Cairo moved.

His hands flew free of the golden manacles as he caught the golden bowl from underneath and sent its contents arcing backward through the air. The thick liquid seemed to cohere and hang suspended as a single transparent mass in the bright green light for an eternity. Then it fell, covering Vera Rosenberg from head to foot.

"No!" Vera shrieked. "No! This cannot be! I have a destiny!"

Cairo froze momentarily, shocked by what he had inadvertently done. Then he shook himself and began to move again. In a second he released his feet, and in another he freed Mrs. Lockhart. In another he wrenched a spear from the hands of one of the stunned lizard soldiers and scrambled onto the altar that held the mining lamp.

"Kill them!" Vera demanded as Cairo drew back his arm. "Cairo, you're a fool. You're outnumbered thousands to one. My servants will tear you limb from limb for what you've done to me!"

"There is no antidote, then?" Cairo asked softly.

"None!"

"Then I am sorry," Cairo said. "It was not my intent that the fluid fall on you. As to your subjects...they will have to find us before they can kill us."

With that he turned and hurled the spear upward with all his strength.

It sailed straight and true toward the small green sun overhead, and when it struck, the sphere imploded with a crack, a brief flash of green fog, and a rain of glass fragments.

The huge cavern was plunged into night. For a moment the beam of the miner's lamp revealed Mrs. Lockhart extending her hand toward Cairo and then the darkness closed again over the panic and chaos that reigned in the tunnels of the lizard men.

* * *

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Gasping for breath, Mrs. Lockhart sank to the floor of the tunnel, then reached down and pulled Cairo up the last of the stairs they had descended only hours before. Cairo collapsed beside her, panting heavily.

"That," Mrs. Lockhart said between breaths, "was a horrific risk you took, exploding that lamp. It could have ignited the gasses and finished us then and there."

"We would have been no more dead," Cairo returned, equally exhausted, "than we would have been otherwise. I could only hope they couldn't track us by smell."

"A safe wager. If their senses were so acute, they would have known about the methane."

Cairo turned on the miner's lamp and examined his wrist-watch. "I fear that I may have underestimated the danger of that methane. It's been more than half an hour since Vera Rosenberg was doused in the Blood of the Green Lion and — "

As if in answer, a muffled explosion shook the floor underneath them. Instead of dying out, the noise seemed to grow. "Cairo," Mrs. Lockhart said, pointing down the stairs they had just climbed. The green glow was gone, replaced by the hellish orange of an inferno. "Run!"

They lunged to their feet and sprinted for the entrance to the tunnel. The walls were shaking now, and dirt and small rocks clattered around them and filled the air with dust.

"How much farther?" Mrs. Lockhart gasped. "I can feel the heat...."

"There!" Cairo exclaimed, as a wall materialized out of the fog of dirt and rubble. He flung himself at it, fumbling for a catch. "It must be here!"

"Patience," Mrs. Lockhart said with forced calm. Her voice was barely audible above the roar as one chamber after another ignited below them. "Let it find you..."

More quietly still she said, "And let it be soon...."

"I have it!" Cairo cried, and the wall opened to reveal the pedestrian tunnel beneath Alameda Street. He pulled Mrs. Lockhart through the opening, went to the mechanism on the outer side with sure fingers, and the wall slid closed as the very air behind it exploded into a blinding yellow fireball.

In the bright Los Angeles sunshine they sat on a park bench and

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watched the ordinary citizens of Los Angeles buying lunch from the vendors on Olvera Street. Cairo's shirt and trousers were in shreds, and the skin beneath was a mass of bruises and lacerations. Mrs. Lockhart had fared little better; her black hair was caked with dust and she wore the remains of Cairo's jacket to cover the damage to her gown.

"The thing that most frightens me," Cairo said, "is the knowledge that some of those lizard creatures doubtless escaped. If what Vera Rosenberg said is true, their rapid evolution could allow them to become more humanoid in the space of a few generations. In our lifetimes there could be lizard men walking among us undetected."

"What is it that you're afraid of?" Mrs. Lockhart asked. "That cold-blooded, repugnant creatures might gain control of the film industry? How would we know the difference?"

"You make light of it, but the knowledge that was lost today — for good or ill — can never be recovered."

"Knowledge is not always the highest good," Mrs. Lockhart said, turning to follow the progress of an early summer breeze through the trees in the park.

"Really? If Rosenberg were alive, what would you have told him about his daughter?"

"I would merely have said that she died in an unfortunate accident, while exploring the tunnels under the city."

"After the way he exploited her throughout her childhood?"

"His cruelty would not justify lack of compassion on my part." Her eyes seemed to lose their focus. "It would be...less than human, somehow."

A small green lizard, no longer than Cairo's hand, had crawled out onto the sidewalk to sun itself. As Cairo watched, it darted toward the busy street, hesitating a few inches from Cairo's right shoe.

"I suppose you're right, as always, Mrs. Lockhart."

She blinked, brushed at the front of her borrowed jacket, and instantly recovered her composure. "Of course I am," she said. "And as it's already past one o'clock in the afternoon, may I suggest we be on our way? We have an engagement in San Diego this evening."

"Indeed," Cairo answered. As he rose, he nudged the lizard gently with his foot and sent it scampering back into the safety of the bushes. "Indeed, Mrs. Lockhart," he laughed, "lead on."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Wild Swans, by Peg Kerr, Aspect/Warner, March 1999, $13.99.

IF TERRI Windling was still editing her Fairy Tale series (the one she began at Ace in the late eighties and continued at Tor through the early nineties), I don't doubt she would have wanted Peg Kerr's latest volume for it. As it stands, *The Wild Swans* can readily take its place among the very best contemporary retellings of fairy tales, those that retain the old charm and magic of the originals, but use the classic material to illuminate elements of our life in the real world where spoons don't talk, kisses don't free princes from amphibian curses, and three wishes are just that, nothing more.

As you might guess from the title, Kerr has chosen the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of the young woman who, to save her eleven brothers from the enchantment of being swans by day, humans by night, takes a vow of silence while she spins coats for them out of nettles. Kerr tells the story much the way it's told in the original, only setting the action in Puritan England, and in a small colony in the New World. To be honest, all that saves these sections is Kerr's gorgeous prose, since anyone familiar with the original story always knows what's coming next, never mind the Puritan trappings.

But the fairy tale only takes up every second chapter in the novel. The other half of the novel is set in contemporary New York and follows the story of Elias, a young gay street person who is helped off the street by a musician/author named Sean who eventually becomes Elias's life partner.

While Elias's story has no supernatural elements, it's magical all the same as we follow his coming out and how he begins to make a new life for himself in NYC's gay community. But there's also a

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chilling undercurrent of menace that slowly permeates these sections of the novel, for it's set at the beginning of the AIDS crisis and depicts all the intolerance, fear, and confusion those days held, from unaffected (and uninformed) people shunning the victims for fear of being infected themselves, to the (also uninformed) members of the gay community refusing to deal with what at that time was known as "gay's cancer."

Not since Michael Bishop's *Unicorn Mountain* has the disease been dealt with in such an informative and evocative manner, and one can only hope that if *The Wild Swans* should happen to fall into the hands of an intolerant reader, he or she will come away with a better understanding of both the disease and the community it has so ravaged.

But what about those wild swans? Do the storylines ever connect? Well, yes and no. This reader found connections that were subtle and magical, but I won't go into them for fear of spoiling your own joy of discovery.

The year's young still, but I can see this remaining near the top of my list of favorite books for 1999 by the time December 31st rolls around.

Spinners, by Anthony McCarten, Morrow, February 1999, $24.

New Zealand playwright Anthony McCarten's first novel starts off with one of the more promising opening paragraphs I've read in a while:

"It was some time on Saturday night after work but before closing time down at the pub that Delia Chapman saw a spaceman. Well, that wasn't quite true. She saw ten of them. They stayed for about half an hour. And they took her on their vessel."

From there McCarten goes on to tell a fascinating story of the impact Chapman's experience has on the small New Zealand town where she lives. In short order, a mysterious circle appears in a local farmer's field with a crushed cow in its center and there are three young women, including Chapman, who claim to have been impregnated by the aliens.

The setting—for North American readers especially — is fresh, and McCarten brings a lively cast on stage: there are Chapman's fellow workers at the slaughter house; her disturbed father, still trying to come to grips with the suicide of his wife; her netball coach who is also the local policeman and only

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wants all the fuss to die down; a burned-out tabloid reporter who comes down with an attack of conscience; the mayor's disgraced nephew who has come to reopen the local library; and a number of others of equal interest.

The prose is precise, as one might expect from a playwright, and his story plays both sides of the fence in a truthful fashion: were there really aliens, or is Chapman deluded? My only complaint with the book is that McCarten writes with a certain smirk in his "voice," as though he's amused by the woes of his working-class characters and we should be, too. Which is unfortunate as it would have been a much better book if he could have written of them with some affection, or at least without the smirk.

In brief:

The Barrens and Others, by F. Paul Wilson, Tor, December 1998, $24.95

Readers of this magazine should be delighted with this collection from Wilson, including as it does some of his best short fiction such as the classic Lovecraftian title story so effectively set in the Pine Barrens area of New Jersey, a killer Repairman Jack story that first appeared a decade ago in *Stalkers*, the grim cautionary tale "Pelts" (including a previously unpublished stage adaptation of the same), and many other delightful excursions into the strange, the odd, and the mysterious as seen through the prism of Wilson's talented vision. Highly recommended.

Time Pieces, by Michael Bishop, Edgewood Press, 1998, $12.

Although the majority of verse collected here isn't specifically sf or fantasy, I'm willing to put forth the thought that most poetry is fantastical anyway simply because a good poet shows us the world in ways we never imagined — and isn't that what we expect from our genre's prose as well?

Take Bishop's description of a chance encounter with a fox in "A Meeting": "Something baffling passed between us:/a bartering of heartbeats." Having experienced such meetings while walking in the bush, for me, Bishop caught the feeling perfectly — I simply hadn't articulated it in such a definitive manner.

I wasn't enamored by everything I read here, but those that did speak to me hit me hard.

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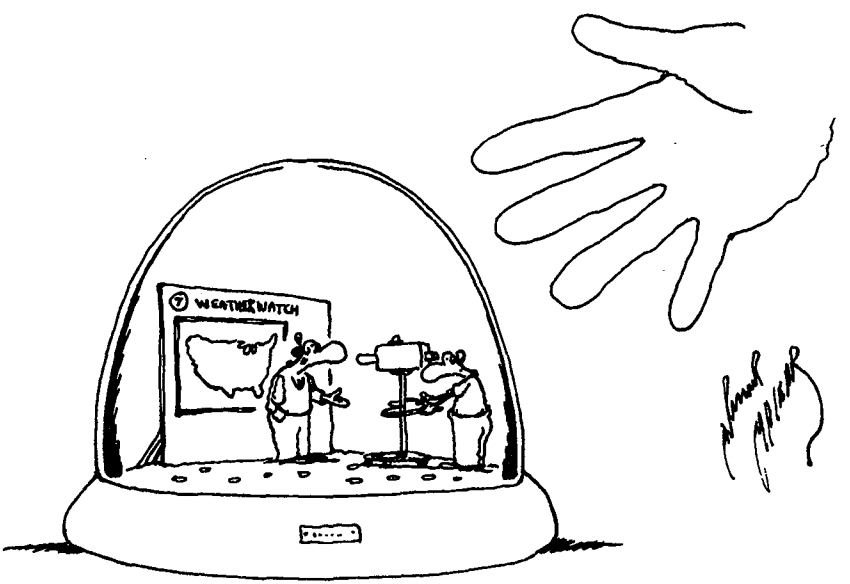
The Republic of Dreams, by G. Garfield Crimmins, W.W. Norton & Co., 1998, $21.95

Crimmins owes a huge debt to Nick Bantock's pioneering work in such books as the Griffin & Sabine series. Like Bantock, Crimmins tells his story as much through art as prose, with all sorts of material we can pull out of the book: a passport, telegrams, a poetic license, a map, postcards. But while *The Republic of Dreams* seems less than original because of that, it's also so charming one has to forgive him. And perhaps I shouldn't be so harsh. After all, someone invented the novel at one point and the rest of us have been borrowing that form to tell our own stories ever since.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



"Good news for you skiers."

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BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"What must I do in the time remaining? Only everything."
— Clive Barker, *Galilee*

IN THE pantheon of things demonic, two insistently sexual creatures thrive: the succubus, which assumes the female form to mate with sleeping men; and the incubus, which exerts the masculine by laying upon, and usually ravishing, its slumbering victims. Ann Arensberg's *Incubus* (Alfred A. Knopf, hc, $24) explores the malefic male impulse — an obvious progenitor of Count Dracula — with formidable style; but the familiarity of her setting and story, framed as an equally familiar occult investigation, results in a disappointing novel that reads like an overwritten episode of *The X-Files*.

It's a shame: Arensberg, best known for an elegant and endearing first novel, *Sister Wolf* (1981), brings serious craft and intent — and a leading imprint, Knopf — to horror fiction at a time when mainstream publishing interest in the subject has waned. Read sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, *Incubus* is powerful and, at times, profound; but its plot simply fails to fulfill the promise of its prose.

The book opens uneasily with a preface in which narrator Cora Whitman, the once-skeptical wife of an Episcopal rector, insists that the experiences she will recount are supernatural in origin — thus preempting the novel's essential tension, which concerns the collision of Cora's hard-headed materialism with husband Henry's wishful spiritualism. Henry, who heard the voice of God on the battlefield in the waning days of World War II, longs for another word from on high — some confirmation, or continuation, of that encounter. His faith, tested by the mundane, is no longer enough — and certainly it is not reinforced by Cora, a curiously apathetic bride whose domesticity

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(cooking, gardening, and the writing of recipe columns) cloaks a deep and divisive anger with a life that seems profoundly rote: "A pastor's job is something like women's work," she tells us. "Once it is done it is almost time to do it over again." The feminist subtext evolves skillfully into supertext with the arrival of a mysterious and invasive "entity," which ends the passivity of their life (and love), awakening Cora and Henry into a world haunted by possibility.

Arensberg's setting — the village of Dry Falls — is one of those isolated, bucolic Maine landscapes that has featured so often in the novels of Stephen King (and a myriad of pretenders) that it is this generation's Transylvania. It is, however, aptly named: Gripped by a drought that is physical and spiritual, its crops and marriages wither as the summer of 1974 deepens. With horrific inevitability, a scourge worthy of the Old Testament — with a nod to Charles Fort's *The Book of the Damned* — is followed by incarnation. Animals give birth to monstrosities. Innocence is lost when schoolgirls are raped by the night-visitor. Then the women of Dry Falls — and finally Cora — are set upon by this demonic force.

The same territory was covered, more than twenty years ago, by Ray Russell in his own *Incubus* (1976), a no-holds-barred horror novel that offered a unique twist on demonic lore. Russell was exploitative and entertaining, while Arensberg is more delicate, and certainly more desperate to assure readers that she indulges in the stuff of horror not for its guilty pleasures but for meaning. Fortunately, she declines to push the obvious gender buttons, and instead presents the nocturnal assaults in terms more humanist than sexist, while offering her own speculation on the *materia prima* of demonology. The problem, however, is that her thoughts are nothing new, but simply restate the Fortean rhetoric of Whitley Strieber's *Communion* series and other ruminations on the premise that We Are Not Alone.

As a result, the philosophical tone that emerges is one that plays Fort's famous maxim — "I think we're property" — into the slogan of a twelve-step program. *Incubus* is a curious homage to nineties paranoia and its obsessive cults of alien abduction, Satanic child abuse, and global conspiracies. As Cora's preface states: "By publishing the following account of our own experiences, we hope to make clear that we, like yourselves, are victims."

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Which reminds us, yet again, that we are not responsible; oh no, not us. The demon made us do it.

A more personal demon inhabits a more powerful, and meaningful, novel to be found just to the right of Arensberg's on the shelves: Clive Barker's *Galilee* (HarperPrism, hc, $26; pb, $7.50). The conundrum faced by its narrator, Edmund Maddox Barbarossa, is seemingly the credo for Barker's creative existence: "What must I do in the time remaining? Only everything." In the fifteen years since publication of his *Books of Blood*, Barker has written ten novels and more than thirty stories; he has scripted and directed three motion pictures (while writing or producing seven others, including most recently the sublime *Gods and Monsters*). His art and photography have been exhibited and reprinted around the globe; and his interviews and critical and social commentary have appeared in media of remarkable variety.

With *Galilee*, Barker's ever-expansive aesthetic and stylistic pursuits find an ideal structure, producing his most controlled and widely appealing novel. It is the first of his novels to be written in first person, embracing and perfecting the experimental structure of "Chiliad: A Meditation" (*Revelations*, 1997), in which he inserted himself directly into his story. Although Maddox Barbarossa is the narrator of *Galilee*, this wheelchair-bound dreamer (who never leaves his stepmother's mansion save through the telling of tales) is a thinly veiled avatar of Barker, offering a uniquely autobiographical work.

An apocalyptic prophecy rouses Maddox from years of self-pity and procrastination to begin penning a long-promised history of his family; but it is a Clive Barker history, in which fact and fantasy meet and mingle with equal significance: "The time has come to tell everything I know. Failing that, everything I can detect or surmise. Failing that, everything I can invent. If I do my job properly it won't even matter to you which is which."

Indeed, his family is a living fiction — myths, if not divinities, "hiding away from a world which no longer wants or needs us." Its founders are two souls as old as heaven: Nicodemus Barbarossa, a long absent and apparently dead father who, like many of Barker's male deities, is a priapic legend; and his lover, the "mother of mothers" Cesaria Yaos, "an eternal force...born out of the primal fire of

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the world." Their lifespans and talents transcend those of humanity, conjuring miracles and madness, taking life in an instant and, quite possibly, giving it. The extraordinary pair have spawned, together or by illicit tryst, four ungrateful children, each of whom evokes a classical deity, yet finds nothing in the modern world but pain.

Christ was born in a stable; Nicodemus perished in one. Cesaria mourns, awaiting his rumored return, in the family manse. This replica of Jefferson's Monticello, built at the turn of the eighteenth century in a North Carolina swamp, is known as L'Enfant — another lost child, rotting with a malaise that is spiritual as well as physical. Like the best of gothic castles, L'Enfant is a place where the past is present, and the present past — where time heals no wounds, but merely preserves them.

Maimed in the same mysterious accident that killed his father, Maddox has lived there for nearly 150 years within the comfortable confines of his imagination. When he finally finds the nerve to enter the dome room of L'Enfant, its skittering shadows part to reveal visions of a greater, yet unreachable, wisdom: "It takes something profound to transform us; to open our eyes to our own glorious diversity." In a moment that echoes Barker's recognition of the meaning of the puzzle that had haunted his own storytelling, Maddox realizes he can walk again:

"For now I had the answer to the question: what lay at the center of all the threads of my story? It was myself. I wasn't an abstracted recanter of these lives and loves. I was —I am — the story itself; its source, its voice, its music. Perhaps to you that doesn't seem like much of a revelation. But for me, it changes everything. It makes me see, with brutal clarity, the person I once was. It makes me understand for the first time who I am now. And it makes me shake with anticipation of what I must become."

In embracing a more personal role as author, Barker pronounces, through Maddox, the refined goal of his writing: "And in my heart I realize I want most to romance you; to share with you a vision of the world that puts order where there has been discordance and chaos. Nothing happens carelessly. We're not brought into the world without reason, even though we may never understand that reason. An infant that lives an hour, that dies before it can ever lay eyes on those who made it, even that soul did not live

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without purpose: this is my sudden certainty. And it is my duty to sweat until I convince you of the same."

With this manifesto, Barker steps away from the bleak and chaotic impulses of certain of his early horrific pieces, while reminding his readers that even the most bloody of his books is fraught with a concern for meaning, if not metaphysics. *Galilee* does not reject Barker's abiding impulse for horror — indeed, there are several fine moments of frisson — but it does invite readers to evolve with him to a level of storytelling that is transcendent: "All I want now is the time to enchant you."

And enchant us he does. *Galilee* is an epic supernatural romance, blending the visionary fantasies of E. R. Eddison and Mervyn Peake with the contemporary gothic of Daphne Du Maurier and William Faulkner. Its narrative elements are disparate — confessional, historical, folk tale, fairy tale, fantasia, romance, and "that most populist of idioms, the rags-to-riches story." In these pages the grotesque and the domestic are harmonized, as Barker pursues his relentless (and increasingly Biblical) vision of a world interpenetrated with the supernatural, where reality and fantasy are not opposites, but one.

The novel is anchored by its namesake, a latter-day (and black) Dionysus. Nearly two hundred pages pass, however, before that "cluster of contradictions" known as Galilee moves onto stage. The pivotal character is Rachel Pallenberg, whose destiny is to become his true love. Wooed from the ranks of commoners, she becomes an American Diana, the latest trophy bride of one of the Gearys, a Kennedy-like dynasty.

The Geary family was founded on a singular materialism: "Business before anything." When Rachel literally fails in her appointed labor, suffering a miscarriage and finally the news that she cannot bear children, her marriage collapses. Her departure is the first of the signs, offered by an astrologer, of the fall of the House of Geary: "Crime had mounted upon crime over the generations, sin mounted on sin, and God help them all — every Geary, and child of a Geary, and wife and mistress and servant of a Geary — it was time for the sinners to come to judgment." Murder and destruction spiral out of a hidden past and into the present, with but a single certainty: "In the end, everything comes back to Galilee."

In this engrossing tale of two

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families entwined by fate and fancy, Barker explores the perils of the magnificent alongside those of the material, deftly eschewing, as he has throughout his career, the use of the fantastic as nostalgic escapism. His demigods are as troubled as his demimondes. By investing the Gearys with the dream of materialism that is America, Galilee would fulfill his own dream of escape; but he learns that even gods have no freedom — particularly from their worshipers.

The truth of *Galilee* has less to do with its characters or their adventures than with its recognition of the importance of the storyteller — his voice and his conscience — in the telling of tales. In this truth is a redemption both personal to Barker and paramount to readers of dark and fantastic fiction, who work their way, again and again, through stories without point or purpose until coming upon the likes of *Galilee.*

In Barker's own words, it is a redemption that is fundamental to our art, and our humanity; thus Maddox concludes: "I've come to see that as nothing can be made that isn't flawed, the challenge is twofold: first, not to berate oneself for what is, after all, inevitable; and second, to see in our failed perfection a different thing; a truer thing, perhaps, because it contains both our ambition and the spoiling of that ambition; the exhaustion of order, and the discovery — in the midst of despair — that the beast dogging the heels of beauty has a beauty all its own."

Douglas E. Winter
January 1999
Oakton VA

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SPECULATIONS

THE MOST NOXIOUS POLLUTANT WILL FINALLY BE TREATED AT ITS SOURCE.

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Dale Bailey teaches English at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and recently published a critical study, American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction. *His own house isn't haunted, but it has grown more spirited since early March, when a six-and-a-half pound daughter named Carson Gale moved in.*

Dale says this story owes its inspiration to his senior year at Bethany College in West Virginia. As he recalls, it rained twenty-five days in a row that year, and he got to wondering...

The Rain at the End of the World

By Dale Bailey

THEY DROVE NORTH, INTO ever-falling rain. Rain slanted out of the evening sky and spattered against the windshield where the humming wipers slapped it away. Rain streamed from the highway to carve twisted runnels in the graveled berm. Raindrops beaded up along the windows and rolled swiftly away as the slipstream caught them up. All about them, only the rain, and to fill the voiceless silence, the sounds of tires against wet pavement and rain drumming with insistent fingers all about the car. And in these sounds, Melissa heard another sound, a child's voice, repeating a scrap of some old nursery rhyme: *rain, rain go away, come again some other day.*

For forty-nine days, nothing but rain, everywhere, all across the United States, in Canada, in Mexico, in Brazil, in England and France and Germany, in Somalia and South Africa, in the People's Republic of China. It was raining all around the world. Rivers of water flowed out of the sky, tides rose and streams swelled, crops rotted like flesh in the fields.

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Weathermen were apologetic. "Rain," they said during the five-day forecast. "Just rain." Statesmen expressed alarm, scientists confusion. Religious fanatics built arks. And Melissa — who once, in a year she could barely remember, had fantasized making love in the rain — Melissa saw her life swept away in the rain. They drove north, to the mountain cabin — three rooms for her and Stuart, her husband. And all about them the unceasing rain.

Melissa sighed and studied the book she had tried to read as they drove east out of Knoxville that afternoon. A failed effort, that, defeated by the swaying car. She glanced at Stuart and almost spoke, but what could she say? The silence was a wall between them; they'd lost the rhythm of conversation. They hadn't exchanged a word since they had changed highways at Wytheville, when Stuart snapped at her for smoking.

Staring at him now, Melissa thought he was changing, a subtle transformation that had begun — when? Days ago? Weeks? Who could say? — sometime during the endless period after the clouds rolled in and rain began to descend like doom from the heavy sky. In the dash lights, his once ruddy features were ghastly and pale, like the features of a corpse. Pasty flesh stretched taut across the angular planes of his skull; his mouth compressed into a white line. Shadow rippled across his tense features, across his hairline, retreating from a sharp widow's peak though he was only thirty-five.

"Do you have to stare at me?" he said. "Why don't you read your book?"

"It's getting dark."

"Turn on the light then."

"I don't want to read. It was making me sick."

Stuart shrugged and hunched closer over the wheel.

Melissa looked away.

At first, it had been refreshing, the rain, lancing out of the afternoon sky as she drove home from her art history class. She parked the car and stood in the yard, staring up at the gray sky, at lightning incandescent in swollen cloud bellies. Rain poured down, spattering her cheeks and eyelids, running fresh into her open mouth, plastering her garments close against her flesh.

By the thirteenth day — she had gone back by then and added them up, the endless days of unrelenting rain — the haunted look began to show

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in Stuart's eyes. His voice grew harsh and strained as discordant music, as it did when she tested his patience with minutiae. That was his word for it: minutiae, pronounced in that gently mocking way he had perfected in the two years since the baby. Not mean, for Stuart was anything but mean; just teasing. "Just teasing," he always said, and then his lips would shape that word again: minutiae, meaning all the silly trivia that were her life — her gardening, her reading, her occasional class.

By this time the pressure had begun to tell on them all. You could see it in the faces of the newscasters on CNN, in the haunted vacancies behind the weary eyes of the scientists on the Sunday talk shows — vacancies of ignorance and despair. How could they account for this rain that fell simultaneously over every square inch of the planet? How could anyone? By this time — the thirteenth day — you could detect the frayed edges of hysteria and fear. Evangelists intoned portentously that the Rapture was at hand. Certain government experiments had gone awry, a neighbor, who had a friend whose brother-in-law worked at Oak Ridge national labs, confided ominously; flying saucers had been sighted over an airbase in Arizona.

On the twenty-seventh day — a Saturday, and by this time everyone was keeping count — Stuart walked about the house with the stiff-kneed gait of an automaton, jerkily pacing from window to window, shading his eyes as he peered out into the gloom and falling rain.

"Why don't you call Jim?" Melissa had said. "See if he wants to do something. Get out of here before you go crazy." Or drive me crazy, she thought, but didn't say it. She was reading *Harper's* and smoking a Marlboro Light — a habit she had picked up two years ago, after the miscarriage. She had always planned to quit, but she somehow never did. It was too easy to smoke, at home alone. Stuart had discouraged her from going back to teaching. Take some time for yourself, he had said. And why not? They didn't need the money now that Stuart had made partner. And it would have been too hard to be around kids.

"I don't want to call Jim," Stuart had said. He peered out into the rain. "I wish you'd quit smoking. It stinks up the whole house."

"I know," she said. And she had tried. But as soon as she quit, she started putting on weight, and Stuart didn't like that either, so what was she to do? Smoke.

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Now, driving through rain across the ridges separating Virginia and West Virginia, she fumbled in her purse for a cigarette. The flame of the lighter threw Stuart's angular face into relief, highlighting a ghostly network of lines and shadows that brooded in the hollows around his eyes and beneath his cheeks. For a moment, before the flame blinked out and darkness rushed back into the car, she knew what he would look like when he was old. But he was handsome still, she thought, distinguished even, with the first hint of gray in his dark hair.

Still handsome after twelve years, still the same Stuart. He had noticed her at a time when few men did, had made her feel beautiful and alive, as if she shared his color and energy, his arrogant charm. And just then, leaning over beside her in freshman composition, he had been boyishly vulnerable. "Look," he'd said, "I'm not very good at this kind of stuff. Do you think you can help me?"

That was a long time ago, but the old Stuart was still there; sometimes she could see vulnerability peeking through the cool and distant resolve he had woven about himself after the baby. She had talked about adoption for a while and she had seen it then — the ghost of that insecurity in the hard curve of his jaw, in the brazen tone of his voice. As if the miscarriage had been his fault.

She cracked her window and blew smoke into the downpour. Stuart coughed theatrically.

"Leave it alone, Stuart," she said.

Stuart grimaced. He flipped on the radio and searched for a station with one hand. Most of the stations had gone off the air by now, same as the television networks. Why, no one could be certain.

Hysteria, Melissa suspected. The government had shut them down to prevent hysteria. In the last week or two news reports had become increasingly disturbing, often bizarre: floods of epic proportions in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys and just about everywhere else, roving gangs in the sodden streets, doom cults who practiced human sacrifice to appease angry weather gods, videotapes of the giant toadstool forest that had erupted over miles and miles of empty western territory. In many places, money was no longer good. People had taken to bartering for canned food, gasoline, cigarettes.

By day thirty-six, Stuart had himself begun to stock up on gasoline

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and the non-perishable food crammed into the back of the Jeep. He had wanted to buy a gun, but Melissa had drawn the line there; the world might retreat into savagery, but she would have no part of it. At night, the two of them sat without speaking in the living room while the rain beat against the roof. They watched the news on television, and then — on the forty-second day of rain, when the airwaves rang with commentary about surpassing Noah — the cable went dead. Every channel blank, empty, gray. The cable company didn't answer; radio news reported that television had gone out simultaneously across the country; and then, one by one over the next few days, the radio stations themselves started to go. Without warning or explanation they simply disappeared, static on the empty dial.

Stuart refused to give up; every hour he turned on the radio and spun through the frequencies. Static, more static, an occasional lunatic babbling (but who was a lunatic now, Melissa wondered, now that the whole world had gone insane?), more static. But the static had a message, too: *Roads are washing away*, the static said, *bridges are being obliterated. The world as we know it is being re-made.*

Now, driving, Stuart spun through the channels again, FM and then AM. Static and static and then a voice: calm, rational, a woman's cultured voice in an echoing studio that sounded far, far away.

They paused, listening:

"It's over," the woman was saying.

And the interviewer, a man, his voice flat: "What's over? What do you mean?"

"The entire world, the civilization that men have built over the last two thousand years, since Homer and the Greeks, since earlier — "

"For Christ's sake," Stuart said, stabbing at the radio; Melissa reached out to stop him, thinking that anything, even lunacy, was better than this silence that had grown up between them in the last years and which seemed now, in the silent car, more oppressive than it ever had.

"Please," she said, and sighing, Stuart relented.

" — apocalypse," the man was saying. "The world is to be utterly destroyed, is that what you're saying?"

"Not at all. Not destroyed. Re-created, refashioned, renewed — whatever."

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"Like the Noah story? God is displeased with what we've made of ourselves."

"Not with what *we've* made," the woman said. "With what *you've* made."

A lengthy pause followed, so lengthy that Melissa for a moment thought they had lost the station, and then the man spoke again. She realized that he had been trying to puzzle out the woman's odd distinction, and having failed, had chosen to ignore it. He said: "What you're saying, though, is that God is out there. And He is angry."

"No, no," the woman said. "*She* is."

"Christ," Stuart said, and this time he *did* punch the search button. The radio cycled through a station or two of static and hit on yet another active channel. The strains of Credence Clearwater Revival filled the car — "Who'll Stop the Rain?" — and that joke had been old three weeks ago. He shut off the radio.

All along, he had been this way, refusing to acknowledge the reality of their situation. All along, he had continued to work, shuffling files and depositions though the courts had all but ground to a halt. It was as if he believed he could make the world over as it had been, simply by ignoring the rain. But by yesterday — day forty-eight — the pressure had truly begun to tell on him. Melissa could see it in his panicked eyes.

That day, in the silent house with Stuart gone to work, Melissa stood by the window and looked out across the yard at toadstools, like bowing acolytes to the rain. Pasty fungoid stalks, cold and rubbery as dead flesh, had everywhere nosed their way out of the earth and spread their caps beneath the poisoned sky.

Melissa went about the house on soft feet; she shut curtains in the living room, closed blinds in the office, lowered shades in the bedroom. All about the house she went, shuttering and lowering and closing, walling away the rain.

When Stuart came home that afternoon, his hair was plastered flat against his skull and his eyes glowered from dark hollows.

"How was your day?" she said. She stood at the top of the stairs, in the door to the kitchen, holding a pot.

He stood below, on the landing, one hand in the pocket of his rain-slick jacket, the other grasping the leather briefcase she had given him for Christmas last year. "Fine," he said.

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That was what he always said. The conversation was as ritualized as some ancient religious ceremony. And so she said, "What did you do today?"

"Nothing."

That was fine, too, that was formula. She turned away. She didn't care what he'd done all day any more than he cared what she'd done. She didn't care about flow charts and tax law and office politics any more than he cared about her garden or her classes or any of the hundred things she did to fill the empty days. That was how it was — even though the rain had begun to erase the world they had known, to sweep away without discrimination the tax laws and the flow charts, and the gardens and art classes, too.

But that night — the forty-eighth night of a rain that would never end — that night was different. In the kitchen, as she placed the pot on the stove, she heard his footsteps squeak across the linoleum. He was behind her. She smelled his cologne, weak beneath the moist earthwormy stench of the rain. She turned and he was standing there, a droplet of rain poised at the end of his nose. Rain dripped off his slicker and pooled on the linoleum floor. Rain flattened his hair against his skull.

"Stuart?" she said.

The briefcase slipped from his fingers. Rain glistened on his cheeks and in his eyes. The other hand came out of his pocket, extending towards her.

Toadstools, pale and spongy against his pale and spongy flesh, as colorless as the pasty skin of some cave-dwelling amphibian, extruded from his fist. Toadstools, spotted and poisonous, dangled from between his fingers.

"Toadstools are growing in the yard," he said.

"I know."

"We have to get to higher ground."

"It won't be any different there," she said. She had a vision of the mountain cabin, three rooms, and all about them the entombing rain.

"It's raining all around the world," she said.

He turned away. The toadstools dropped from his fingers as he left the room. Melissa stared at the fungoid stalks, cold and colorless as dead flesh against the linoleum. She shuddered when she picked them up.

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And so this morning, on the forty-ninth morning, they had fled at last. The highways were virtually abandoned; occasionally four-wheel drives zipped past, flying harried in either direction, driven by panicked, pasty-looking men. In fields to either side of the road, lakes, ponds, seas swelled and grew. Mushrooms sprouted at the horizon, overshadowing the trees; on hilly slopes they saw houses and barns decaying beneath masses of putrid mold. Three times the pavement had disappeared before them, submerged; three times Stuart had dropped the Jeep into four-wheel drive and edged forward, fearing sinkholes and washouts; three times their luck had held and they had emerged to wet pavement once again.

They fled east, up 81 to 77, north into West Virginia and the Appalachians. They had a cabin there, near a ski resort in Raleigh County. Melissa remembered when they had bought it a year ago. When *Stuart* had bought it; he hadn't consulted her. He had come home late one day, clutching the papers, his eyes wild and feverish. "I used the money," he had announced, "I made a down payment on a cabin and two acres of woodland." Something cold and hateful pierced her then. Stuart had spent the money, the baby's money, and the spending came like the icy needle-probe of reality:

There was no baby. There would not ever be one.

Now, on the forty-ninth day, they fled northward into night, seeking higher ground, but the rain stayed with them, omnipresent and eternal. It fell out of the sky in solid sheets, flowing over the black pavement and soaking Stuart when he pulled over to refill the tank from the gas cans strapped in the back of the Jeep. Cursing, he would climb back inside and crank the heat to its highest setting, and each time Melissa would remember her long-ago fantasy of making love in the rain. She took a last drag from the cigarette and let the wind have it, watching in the mirror as it tumbled away, extinguished by the rain.

Sodium lights appeared, lining the highway. Ahead, a mountain loomed dark against the gray sky. The road rose to meet it, rose, and rose, and plunged down toward a granite wall. A tunnel — the second one since Wytheville — opened up before them at the last moment, and Melissa clenched her fists, fearing washouts, fearing cave-ins. Then they were inside, the sound of the rain disappearing as they crossed under the mountain and into West Virginia. Bars of shadow and light flashed across

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Stuart's face and the hum of tires against dry pavement filled the car. The wipers scraped against the dry windshield, back and forth, back and forth, and then they emerged from the tunnel into a shifting wall of rain.

"Christ," Stuart said. "Do you think it'll ever stop? Do you think it'll rain forever?"

She looked away, out the window, into the falling rain, and that rag of nursery rhyme returned to her. "Rain, rain go away," she said. "Come again some other day."

Night closed in around them. Mountains rose above the road like the shoulders of giants, black against the black sky. Melissa smoked her last cigarette. Far ahead, huddled high against an arm of the ridge, Melissa saw a sprinkle of lights, all that remained of a once-bustling town. The cabin lay farther north, isolated still higher in the mountains. Three rooms, Stuart, and all about them the besieging rain.

At last, the lights came up around them.

"Would you look at that?" Stuart said, pointing.

She saw it then, as well, a blazing Texaco sign towering above the highway. Beyond it stretched a strip of hotels, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants — most of them dark, abandoned.

"It could be a trap," Stuart said, "to lure in the unwary."

She sighed.

"We should have bought that gun."

"No guns," she said.

"We'll have to risk it. If they have gas, we could top off the tank, refill our cans. Maybe they'll have kerosene."

Without another word, he exited to the strip, passed the boarded-up ruins of fast-food restaurants and hotels, and stopped the Jeep beneath the canopy by the Texaco's islands. She watched as he studied the parking lot suspiciously; he put her in mind of some frightened forest creature, and she had the disquieting thought that men weren't so far removed from the jungle. Satisfied at last, he killed the engine; the noise of the rain grew louder, almost deafening, drowning out her thoughts. She opened the door and stood, stretching.

"I'm going to the restroom," she said, without turning; she heard the pump come on, gasoline gush into the tank.

"You want anything from inside?" he asked.

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"Get me a Coke and a pack of cigarettes."

The bathrooms were across the parking lot, through the downpour. Melissa shrugged on her rain coat, slipped the hood over her head, and darted across the pavement, one arm cocked ineffectually above her, warding off the rain. The interior of the restroom stank of urine and bleach; mold had begun to blossom here, sodden, cancerous roses along the base of the dry-wall. A trash can overflowed in one corner. Melissa's nose wrinkled in disgust as she covered the toilet seat with toilet paper.

When she returned, Stuart was waiting in the Jeep.

"Can you believe it," he said. "He took money, good old-fashioned American money. Fool."

"You get my stuff?"

He gestured at the dash. A can of Diet Coke waited there, sweating condensation.

"What about my cigarettes?"

"I didn't get them. We have to be careful now. Who knows when we'll be able to see a doctor again?"

"Jesus, Stuart." Melissa got out and slammed the door. She walked to the tiny shop. The attendant sat behind the register, his feet propped against the counter, reading a novel which he placed face-down when the door chimed behind her.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

"Pack of Marlboro Lights, please."

He shook his head as he pulled the cigarettes from an overhead rack. "Shouldn't smoke, lady. Bad for you."

"I've given up sun-bathing to compensate."

The attendant laughed.

She looked up at him, a young man, not handsome, with flesh the color and texture of the toadstools she had scraped off the kitchen floor. Flesh like Stuart's flesh, in the midst of that subtle change of his.

But nice eyes, she decided. Clear eyes, blue, the color of water. Eyes like the baby might have had. And this thought moved her to say something — anything, just to make contact. "Think it'll ever stop raining?"

"Who knows? Maybe it's a good thing. Cleansing."

"You think?"

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"Who knows? Wash the whole world away, we'll start again. Rain's okay by me."

"Me, too," she said, and now she thought again of the fragment of radio program. *Is God out there*? the host had wanted to know. *And is He angry*?

She is, the woman had replied. *She is.*

Melissa's hand stole over her belly, where the baby, her baby, had grown and died. Abruptly, the crazed logic of the idea, its simple clarity and beauty, seized her up: This was the world they had made, she thought, men like Stuart, this world of machines and noise, this world of simple tasteless *things*. This is the world that is being washed away. Their world.

Outside, Stuart began to blow the horn. The sound came to her, discordant, importunate. Melissa glanced out at the Jeep, at Stuart, impatient behind the steering wheel, anxious to be off, anxious to get to higher ground. Three rooms in the mountains, just three. She and Stuart and all about them the imprisoning rain. It fell still, beyond the roof over the fuel islands, blowing out of the sky in sheets, dancing against the pavement, chasing neon reflections of the Texaco sign across black puddles.

"Lady? You okay? Miss?"

"Missus," she said, out of habit. She turned to face him.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine, just distracted that's all."

The horn blew again.

"Nice guy."

"Not really. He tries to be, sometimes."

The horn again. Impatiently.

"You better go."

"Yeah." She dug in her purse for money.

"Forget it. Like it means anything now, right?"

She hesitated. "Thanks, then."

"You're welcome. Be careful. Who knows what the roads are like in the mountains."

She nodded and stepped out into moist air. Stuart had gotten out of the Jeep. He stood by the open door, his flesh orange and spongy beneath the street lights, his arms crossed against his chest. He stared at her

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impatiently, beyond him only darkness, only rain. Water fell from the night sky, against the gleaming pavement, the buildings, the shining neon Texaco sign. Against everything, washing it all away.

"Hurry up," Stuart said.

And she said, without even realizing she was going to say it, "I'm not coming. You go ahead." When she said it, she was suffused suddenly with warmth and excitement and life, a sensation of release, as if a hard knot of emotion, drawn tight in her chest through long years, had suddenly loosened.

"What?" Stuart said. "What are you talking about?"

Melissa didn't answer. She walked past Stuart and the Jeep, stopping at the edge of the canopy that sheltered the fuel islands. She shrugged out of the rain coat, let it drop to the pavement behind her. Ignoring Stuart, she lined up the tips of her toes against the hard clear edge of the pavement where it was wet, where the roof left off and the rain began.

Stuart said, "Melissa? Melissa?"

But Melissa didn't answer. She stepped out into a world that was ending, into a gently falling rain. It poured down over her, cool and refreshing against her cheeks and lips and hair, caressing her with the hands of a lover.

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The last time we published one of Kedrigern's adventures—"Cold Comfort" in our February issue—a reviewer referred to Mr. Morressy as a "grizzled veteran." John commented that he thought that term always sounded like an entrée that should perhaps be served with asparagus tips and a simple salad. (Also called "grizzled" in that same review, Kit Reed said she was going to put in her false teeth and whack that critic with her walker.)

The eternally young Mr. Morressy lives in East Sullivan, New Hampshire, where he is cooking up new stories to serve with a bottle of Brouilly.

Floored

By John Morressy

WHEN GRUNJAK, LORD OF the Blighted Barrens, sent his first appeal for relief from a spell that had left him covered from head to foot with boils, Kedrigern read it with delight. "Couldn't happen to a more deserving man," he said.

Princess, who considered her husband to be a reasonably compassionate wizard, was surprised but withheld comment even when a second appeal left Kedrigern unmoved. "They'll improve his appearance," he said upon reading it, chuckling with malicious satisfaction.

This time she could not remain silent. "A fellow human being is suffering under a terrible spell. You owe it to the poor man to despell him."

"No one owes Grunjak anything, my dear," he replied, adding after a moment's thought, "Except perhaps a good thrashing."

"What has the man done?"

Kedrigern sat back in his comfortable chair, made a little tent of his fingertips, and said, "To me, personally, nothing. He lacks the temerity to injure a wizard. But to others...it would be easier to tell you what he hasn't

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done. Grunjak of the Blighted Barrens is known among those unfortunate enough to be his neighbors as Grunjak the Gross, the Greasy, the Grisly, the Grim, the Grungy, the Greedy, the Gruesome, and the Grotty, as well as numerous non-alliterative epithets I would not repeat in the presence of a lady. To describe him as a malevolent, vicious, brutal dolt, liar, coward, bully, and thief would be shameless flattery. A curse of boils is mild recompense for his misdeeds, and I see no reason to interfere with the course of justice."

Princess could read his moods. She said no more, but waited.

Grunjak's third appeal opened with the promise of a complete reformation. He swore by every saint that once cured, he would forsake barbarity and brutality, empty his dungeons and his coffers, abandon looting and lechery, and give up senseless violence, extortion, and cruelty. He would repent, he would make good, he would be a new and better man. Kedrigern paused in his reading to observe, "An easy promise to make. A new Grunjak could hardly be a worse one"

Princess was not of the same mind. "You can't shrug this off," she said. "The reformation of such an appalling man would be a great service to humanity. It has to be done, and no one else is even trying."

The latter observation was not quite true. Zealous clergy had made several attempts to bring the light to Grunjak, but every monk who set foot on his land had been so severely battered that he was incapable of anything but silent prayer for months afterward. The neighboring landowners were aware of Grunjak's ways, but tolerant. "There he goes again," they would say at word of each new atrocity. "Grunjak will be Grunjak." No punitive expedition was ever mounted against him, or suggested. In all likelihood, the idea had never occurred to anyone. Grunjak was, after all, one of them. Besides, his kingdom was poor and his treasury, despite his rapacity, was trifling; there was nothing to be gained by such an action but the satisfaction of doing right, an inducement easily resisted by the local nobility.

Kedrigern looked up from the letter. "I don't want to try, either. Let him suffer. He deserves it."

"You must help him. It's your professional duty," Princess said.

"He's a thoroughly rotten, ugly, nasty man."

"You can't expect all your clients to be beautiful unfortunate princesses."

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"And why not?"

"Don't be difficult. You're not required to admire your clients, only to help them."

"I prefer to let Grunjak help himself. He should be good at it — he's been helping himself to other people's property for thirty years. And besides, he lives three days' ride from here in a particularly nasty stretch of country. You know how I feel about travel."

"We all have to make sacrifices now and then," she said. "If you despell him, he'll reform. He promised."

"Grunjak is a notorious liar."

"Give him the benefit of the doubt. You owe it to society."

Kedrigern muttered something indistinct but unenthusiastic about society's claim on him, settled deeper into the cushions, and read on in silence, frowning. When he came to the end of the letter, he arose, tucked the missive into his tunic, and announced, "Grunjak is receiving his just desserts. But if it will make you happy, my dear..."

"It will."

"Then I'll go."

"That's very sweet of you," she said.

"Your happiness is my pleasure." He took her hand and raised it to his lips. He considered it unnecessary to mention the wording of the post-script initialed with an unsteady G: *A fee of five crowns will be paid immediately upon cure.*

Kedrigern left the next morning, alone, astride his great red-eyed, silver-horned steed, an enchanted creature black as midnight, massive as an ox, and intimidating as a crouching panther. Intimidation seemed to him a wise policy when dealing with the likes of Grunjak.

He arrived late on the morning of his third day of travel. The trip was completed without incident, delay, or pleasure. Grunjak's ugly hulk of a castle, Ma Grossièreté, rose from a low mound at the center of a desolate and windswept wasteland. Under a sky the color of ashes, flat soggy fields extended to the horizon, bare and lifeless save for a few feeble trees.

A trio of rancid-smelling brutes bade the wizard a sullen welcome and conducted him directly to their lord's chambers, where Grunjak awaited him in a slipper bath. Only Grunjak's head was visible, made even less

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attractive than usual by the superimposition of a score of blazing red spots each the size of a thumbnail.

Grunjak dismissed the guards. As soon as he and Kedrigern were alone, he moaned, "Help me, wizard!"

"That's why I'm here, Grunjak,' said Kedrigern. "But first, I want your solemn word that you'll abandon your wicked ways if I despell you."

"Oh, I will, I will, I swear it. I've learned a bitter lesson, and I'll never forget it. May I suffer horrible torments if I go back on my word!"

"You will. Are the boils everywhere?"

Grunjak groaned. "Even on the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet."

"That's a very thorough curse. Who placed it?"

"A nasty hateful old farmer. We had just finished driving off his livestock and loading up his grain, and were giving his serfs and children and grandchildren a good beating when he burst out of his hovel and put a curse on me. Me, his lord and master! We hadn't laid a finger on the old scoundrel. Hadn't even burned down his barn. There's no gratitude in peasants these days, wizard. No loyalty. No sense of duty. They're utterly selfish."

"There's to be no more of that once you're cured, Grunjak."

"There won't be. I had him hanged."

"You miss my point. I mean no more looting and beating and summary executions."

Grunjak gave a start, splashing water in all directions. His eyes widened in pained disbelief. "But that's what makes me a leader!"

"No, it's what makes you a monster whom people wish to see covered in boils. I should think you'd have grasped that fact. You must change your ways completely, Grunjak. You must repent and become a new man."

After a long meditative pause, Grunjak muttered, "All right. I'll change."

"Swear."

"I swear I'll change. The very minute the boils disappear."

"Very well. Get out of the bath."

Grunjak, dripping wet and naked, bespangled with boils and bedecked with the scars of past battles, was a sight to make even a hardened wizard wince. Averting his eyes, Kedrigern dropped the contents of three small

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vials into the slipper bath, recited the appropriate spell, and instructed Grunjak to immerse himself once more, completely, and stay under for a slow count of ten.

When Grunjak broke the surface, his battered face was free of boils. "They're gone! They're all gone!" he spluttered.

"Of course they're gone. Didn't you believe I could manage it?"

"I did, I did, I never doubted you for a minute! You're a great wizard and I'll sing your praises everywhere I go."

"Gratitude, Grunjak?" said Kedrigern, surprised. "Your reformation is off to a good start. Just remember to stay reformed, or the boils will be back within the hour. And now I'll take my five crowns and go."

Grunjak rummaged through the clothing that lay in a heap beside the slipper bath and dug out a pouch. He handed it to the wizard. Kedrigern opened it and shook out three golden crowns. He studied them for a moment, then said, "Where's the rest?"

"You've got three crowns there."

"Three is not five."

"I can't give you any more, wizard. I swear it!"

"Men in my profession do not haggle, Grunjak. Your letter offered five. I accepted. The fee, therefore, is five."

"I've never had that much in the treasury."

"Then you were very foolish and wicked to have promised it."

"I promised it before I reformed. You shouldn't have believed me. You knew that I was wicked and deceitful."

"You were also covered with boils — as you will be in a very short time unless I get my five crowns."

"Those three crowns have emptied my treasury and left me penniless! The only way I could manage five would be to go back to looting and plundering! You don't want that, do you?"

"You really should have thought of that earlier, Grunjak. This puts us both in an awkward position."

"I beg you, wizard, don't do anything in anger! Take the three crowns as part payment, and we'll look around the castle and see if there's anything I can give you to make up the balance. That's fair, isn't it?'

Kedrigern hesitated. In truth, five crowns was an enormous fee for a simple despelling; three was quite adequate. But he had not set the

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amount; Grunjak had offered it freely. Then again, a man covered with boils is hardly in a state of mind to bargain. He can easily be victimized. Here was an opportunity to be generous in a noble cause. A show of good will at the outset might do much to encourage Grunjak's reformation.

"Very well, Grunjak. Dry yourself off and get dressed. I'm sure we can find something."

For a time, it seemed likely that they would not. Grunjak's was a poor land; his taste was execrable and his booty was scanty and in very poor condition: dented cooking pots, cracked dishes, dirty old clothes, bent and rusty weapons and farm implements, unsteady tables and uncomfortable chairs. Most of it looked to have been taken not for any intrinsic value, but merely for the pleasure of looting.

As they picked through Grunjak's meager treasury, Kedrigern's hopes waned. His thoughts turned to the futility of worldly greed. In a lifetime of remorseless looting and plundering, Grunjak had accumulated a midden of rubbish. Taken all together, it was not worth a tenth of a crown.

Grunjak's gravelly voice broke into his musings. "How about a carpet? A wizard can always use a nice carpet. I bought this one from a knight — "

"You bought it? Paid for it?" Kedrigern asked, startled.

Drawing himself up indignantly, Grunjak said, "Of course I paid for it. I never took advantage of my peers, only the weak and defenseless. It was so much easier. But that's all behind me now."

"Good. About the carpet...."

"This knight had picked it up somewhere in the East. He said it was very valuable, but I had problems with it, so I used it to plug a hole in the wall," he said, pointing to the wall where what appeared to be a wad of rags was stuffed into a hole, held in place by a board nailed over it.

Kedrigern went to the carpet and laid a hand on it. He felt the tingle of magic. It was so faint as to be almost imperceptible, but it was unmistakably present.

"What sort of problems did you have?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing serious. Nothing that would trouble a wizard. It used to move around, that's all."

"Move around?"

"Every night I'd set it by the door, and every morning I'd find it lying

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in front of the fireplace. The wind blew it about. This castle gets pretty breezy in winter."

"Let's have a look at that carpet."

Grunjak jerked the board free with one violent yank, pulled out the carpet, and spread it on the treasury floor. It was dirty and rumpled, but the colors had held up well, and the design was quite attractive.

"That would go for three crowns in any market I know," Grunjak said with the air of a connoisseur.

"Not without a good cleaning and major repairs. Look at the condition of the tassels."

"Who notices tassels?"

"I do. And what about those holes?"

"I tried nailing it down, but it kept moving around anyway. Even if you knock off a crown for the holes, it's still worth two."

Kedrigern was silent, calculating. The carpet definitely possessed some kind of magic. It was prudent to make sure that magical objects were in the proper hands, and there were no hands more proper than a wizard's. If the magic were benevolent, it would be put to good use; if it proved nasty, the thing could be despelled and cleaned up. And if the magic were exhausted, or nearly so, this carpet would fit nicely in the great room before the hearth.

"Done, Grunjak," he announced.

By early afternoon he was on his way, the carpet rolled up and tied behind him. His horse showed interest, but no discomfort. Kedrigern took this as a good sign: enchanted things should be at ease with one another.

He arrived home in the early afternoon of a clear bright day. With the assistance of his house-troll he unrolled the carpet on the lawn before the cottage for a close inspection. Experience had taught him that it was wise to determine the exact properties of magic objects before introducing them into his household.

Princess flew out to greet him with a kiss and a fond embrace. At sight of the carpet she gave him a puzzled look. "Wherever did you get that?" she asked.

"Part of my fee. It has some kind of magic."

"What kind?"

"I don't know yet."

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She circled it once, slowly, examining it from a safe distance. "It certainly isn't self-cleaning magic. Or look-your-best magic. The thing's a mess."

"Everything in Grunjak's castle is a mess. This is just a bit worse than most. It was stuffed into a hole in the wall."

"What did he do to the tassels? A carpet looks so pathetic without proper tassels," Princess said.

The carpet had apparently once possessed an impressive tassel of gold and silver threads at each corner, but only vestiges of these splendid adornments remained. Two had been badly burned, another neatly sheared off, and of the fourth only a few strands survived.

"It's all ripped and bitten, too," said Princess with a shudder of distaste. "Grunjak's palace must be overrun with rats."

"It is, but they didn't make the holes. Those are nail holes. Grunjak nailed it down. He said it used to move around."

"Maybe it's a scatter rug."

Kedrigern drew out his medallion. He raised it to his eye and studied the carpet through the small hole at its center. Princess waited patiently for a time, and finally asked, "Do you see anything?"

"It's definitely magical. The magic is very weak, though. Hardly perceptible, even through the Aperture of True Vision." He tucked away the medallion, rubbed his eye, then folded his arms and looked down on the carpet, speculating.

Princess tapped his shoulder. "Have you had lunch?"

"Only a bit of bread and an apple along the way."

"Before you get too deeply absorbed in this carpet, you ought to have lunch," she said. "I'll just fly in and have Spot prepare something."

"Of course! That's it, my dear!"

"There, you see? You were hungrier than you thought."

"No, no, no, I mean flight! Flying! This is a flying carpet!"

She looked at the carpet, then at him, then back at the carpet. "It's not flying anywhere now," she said.

"It's very low on magic. Mistreatment and neglect will do that sometimes. Yes, of course, a flying carpet. That would explain why it kept moving around Grunjak's castle."

"From what you said of Grunjak, I should think a flying carpet would fly away from him as soon as possible."

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"It wasn't free to fly off. He acquired it legally, actually paid for it, so the carpet was his."

Princess's interest was stirred. "If this is really a flying carpet it would be a great convenience. It would have to be cleaned and patched up before I'd be seen on it, but just think of the time and trouble it would save us. You might even change your attitude about travel if you could just sit on a carpet and go."

"I might indeed. Yes, it would be convenient. And comfortable. Plenty of room to stretch out."

"There's even room for guests."

"And space for luggage. It has definite possibilities."

"Before we explore them further, let's have lunch," Princess said, taking his hand and drawing him inside.

They enjoyed an unhurried meal, he describing the journey and the sights along the way, embellishing freely since it had been fairly dull and uneventful overall, she filling him in on her progress in spelling. Conversation soon turned to the possibilities of their new acquisition. They knew of no spells for cleaning, patching holes, and restoring tassels; but Spot had become quite accomplished at household chores, and they felt secure entrusting the problem to him, provided he was carefully instructed and closely supervised.

After a second mug of cider, they strolled out to examine the carpet's magical properties in more detail. To their surprise, it was gone.

"Could it have blown away?" Princess asked.

"There's no wind at all. Hardly a breeze."

"Flown away?"

"That usually requires a verbal command."

"Do you think Spot might have eaten it?"

"I heard him in the kitchen all the time we were having lunch."

"Then where — "

"There!" Kedrigern cried, pointing to the lawn beneath the pair of great oaks that stood near the cottage.

They hurried to where the carpet lay tidily spread out in the shade. Neither of them spoke. They were too puzzled even to speculate on how it had changed locations.

"This is fascinating," said Kedrigern. "It couldn't have blown here, no

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one gave it a command and no one moved it.... I wonder...." He cleared his throat and in his most commanding voice said, "Carpet, if you have the power to speak, speak to me!"

The carpet did not utter a word.

"I've never heard of a talking carpet. Not even a magic one," said Princess.

"Neither have I, but it doesn't hurt to try." Kedrigern thought for a time, then said, "If you have a means of communicating, carpet, please employ it now."

Nothing happened at first; then, after a tense interval, the threads of the sole surviving tassel gave a single feeble twitch.

"It's trying to express itself," Kedrigern whispered.

"It doesn't seem to have much to say," Princess replied.

"Well, if you'd been stuffed in a hole in the wall for heaven only knows how many years and lost your tassels — look! It's twitching again!"

"It can't tell us much by twitching."

But the frayed and enfeebled tassel was clearly limbering up. After a few more tentative twitches, it curled itself around a twig and began to make scratching motions in the soil. Kedrigern rushed into the cottage, emerging moments later with a pen, an inkwell, and a sheet of parchment. He laid the pen close by the tassel.

At once the emaciated tassel tossed the twig aside and coiled about the pen. The wizard then placed the remaining writing implements in easy reach, stepped back, and said, "Did you move yourself here?"

The carpet dipped the pen in the inkwell, shook off a few excess drops, and wrote in shaky script, *Yes, Master. Sorry.*

"Why?"

I feared I would fade in the sunlight, causing disappointment to my benevolent Master. Ordinarily I do not act unbidden, but —

"No need to apologize," Kedrigern broke in. "It was thoughtless of me to put you there."

Oh, no, no, Master, you must not blame yourself. It was sheer audacity on my part, the carpet scribbled.

"Nothing of the sort. You're a flying carpet, and you flew. That's nothing to apologize for."

But I flew without your leave, Master. Without your command, I

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drew upon already much depleted reserves of magic that should have been dedicated entirely to your service. I did a shameless selfish thing. I deserve unraveling.

"Ah. I begin to comprehend," said Kedrigern. "Grunjak kept putting you in places where you might get burned, or faded, or torn, and you kept moving away. It was pure self-preservation."

Precisely so, Master.

"And moving without a command draws on your reserves of magic."

It practically drains them, Master.

"Well, you needn't worry about such treatment here, Carpet. Do you have a name?"

Kurdestan is my name. My beloved master and beautiful mistress may call me "Stan" if they so choose.

"All right, Stan. First thing we'll do is give you a good cleaning and air you out. No beating, I promise you. We'll take you for a spin every now and then, but we won't nail you to the floor or stuff you in holes."

The carpet, which had risen several inches off the ground at Kedrigern's promise of better treatment, sank at the mention of flying. Its descent was accompanied by a soft sighing sound, and the tassel wrote the single word *Alas.*

"Why 'Alas,' Stan? Don't you enjoy flying?"

Oh, wise and kindly master, I loathe flying. I wish only a proper place on a decent, solid, honest wooden floor.

"But people would walk on you," said Princess.

Yes! Yes! wrote the carpet in huge exuberant letters.

"Do you mean to say you like the idea of having people walk all over you, and put tables and chairs on you?"

Oh, yes, most kindly and perceptive lady! Even spills would not be taken amiss. That is the way of the carpet. The tassel paused, then with a flourish wrote, *Some were born to fly; some achieve flight; some, like me, have flight thrust upon them.*

"Don't get dramatic, Stan," Kedrigern said.

Princess regarded the carpet with bewilderment. "I don't understand how you can complain. Flying is wonderful!"

For a beautiful lady with gossamer wings, it may be so. But carpets

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are carpets. They were not meant to fly about the world, they were meant to lie on floors. If carpets were meant to fly, we would have been given wings.

"You've been given magic. That's even better," said Princess. When the carpet made no response, she demanded, "Well, isn't it?"

After a thoughtful interval, the carpet wrote, *For birds and insects, flying is a way of life. For people, it is a pleasing diversion. For carpets, it is a painful ordeal. The cold and dampness of the upper air loosen our knots and accelerate fading. Over time there is serious shrinkage.*

Princess bit her lip and looked chagrined. The possession of a flying carpet delighted her, and she hated to relinquish the convenience it afforded. But she was too tender-hearted to force her household furnishings to fly against their will.

Kedrigern said, "If you hate flying so much, why did you become a flying carpet, Stan?"

I had no choice in the matter, wise and benevolent Master. I was one of a large family. My brothers and sisters went to decorate the palaces of sultans. I was bought by a sorcerer, enchanted, and sold to an emir who made use of me to spy on his neighbors. He was blown off by a high wind one stormy night, and I flew on, masterless, without goal or purpose, until I became soaked with rain and was forced down near an encampment of nomads. They took me in and treated me with kindness. For a long time I fulfilled the true purpose of my kind, though I lay on sand rather than a proper floor. Then I was seized by an avaricious emir. Since that evil day, I have passed through many hands and suffered great indignities and unspeakable cruelties. I was sold to a Frankish knight who brought me home to his castle. He beat me regularly and at last sold me to Grunjak. And now you have delivered me.

"There'll be no more cruelty, we promise," said Princess gently. "But we really would like you to fly from time to time. I do my own flying, but my husband has to travel on horseback, and a long journey can be so fatiguing."

I shall serve you loyally, the carpet wrote. But its tassel drooped and the pen moved sluggishly.

"Well, let's give it a try," said Kedrigern, settling himself cross-legged on the carpet. "Go, Stan!"

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Urged on with such élan, the carpet shot forward like a bolt from a crossbow. Kedrigern tumbled heels over head and rolled off the rear and onto the grass. "Come back here!" he howled.

The carpet, well off in the distance by now, did a tight turn and circled back to the foot of the oak tree, where it stopped abruptly at Kedrigern's side and floated gently to the ground. The wizard rose, brushed himself off, and seated himself once again, keeping well forward. "This time, control your exuberance," he said. "Go slowly. Once around the house and yard, and don't get more than a foot off the ground."

The carpet rose and moved forward at a dignified pace, slightly faster than a walk. It accelerated as it proceeded along the tree line, picked up more speed as it swung around the cottage and the outbuildings, and was moving at a good clip as it made its last turn and headed across the yard toward the oaks.

The door yard was enclosed by a very sturdy two-rail fence. The lower rail was just a bit more than a foot off the ground. The top rail was about head-high to a man seated on a flying carpet. They were headed for the fence at alarming speed.

Kedrigern had been enjoying the trip. His attention was on the exhilarating sensation of flight, not the fence, and only a warning shout from Princess, who was flying above, following him, alerted him to the danger.

"Stop!" he cried.

The carpet stopped at the instant of command. Kedrigern did not. He continued his forward progress at a speed only slightly diminished, inserting himself neatly between the rails, skimming along the grass on his face, and coming to a stop not far from his starting point.

The carpet sank close to the ground and began to back off slowly. Kedrigern climbed to his feet, shook his head, felt his limbs, and brushed himself off. He looked around. His expression was grim. Catching sight of the carpet trying its best to ease unobtrusively around the corner of the house, he pointed and cried, "You! Assassin! Get back here at once, do you hear?"

So low now that it brushed the grass in its passing, the carpet moved slowly toward him and stopped at his feet. It did not settle, but remained just a hair off the ground, trembling slightly. Kedrigern looked down on it,

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his arms folded, his jaw set severely. He said nothing. Princess fluttered to his side and placed a hand on his arm. Still he said nothing.

"We promised no cruelty," she said.

"*You* promised. I said nothing of the sort."

"Yes, you did. You promised no beating."

Kedrigern gave an exasperated sigh. The carpet edged a bit closer and, dipping a corner, attempted to dust off his boot.

"There," said Princess. "It's sorry."

"So am I. I should have left it to plug the wall in Grunjak's castle."

"Don't frighten it."

"I don't mean to be cruel, my dear, but this carpet is not cooperating. It represents a large portion of my fee, and I see no way that I'll ever get to put it to proper use."

"With a little cleaning and patching it would look nice in front of the fireplace in the great room. It would be happy there, too."

"I suppose so. But if all I wanted was a carpet for the great room, I needn't have gone all the way to Grunjak's for it."

"Surely you wouldn't want an ordinary carpet on your floor. You're a wizard. You have standards to maintain."

"I also have my life to preserve. This thing would have knocked my brains out against the fence rail."

"Don't blame the carpet. It was doing what it's supposed to do."

"Yes, but it doesn't *want* to do what it's supposed to do, and I think it's deliberately creating problems." Glancing down, he said, "You don't want to fly me around, do you? Not me, not anyone. Tell the truth, Stan."

The carpet slunk to where the pen and inkstand stood. Taking up the pen, it wrote. *All I want is to be a real carpet. I want to lie on a nicely waxed floor in front of a roaring fire. Not too close. The sparks can be very distressing.*

"I thought as much," said Kedrigern. He remained silent for a time, looking thoughtfully down on the carpet, and finally said, "Let's go inside. Princess will show you where to lie down. And see to it that you stay put."

"What are you going to do?" Princess asked.

"I'm going to look through my spelling books. There may be a way to work this out to our mutual satisfaction."

* * *

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It was some months later that a solitary figure dressed in the robes of a pilgrim made his way to the little cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain. Kedrigern was in the door yard, seated amid cushions in his most comfortable chair, meditating in the autumn sunshine. The pilgrim hailed him wearily in a gruff but kindly voice.

"Greetings to you, pilgrim," the wizard replied, rising and going to the gate. "May I offer you something?"

"A sip of water. No more."

"How about a crust of bread?"

The pilgrim weighed the offer, then said, "As long as it's stale."

Kedrigern studied the gaunt, dusty figure for a time, then said, "Have we met? You look familiar."

"I am that wretch who once was known as Grunjak the Gross, the Greasy, the Grisly, the Grim, the Grungy, the Greedy, the Gruesome, and the Grotty."

"Ah, yes, of course, Grunjak. You've lost some weight."

"I eat very little these days. I am on pilgrimage to atone for the evil life I once led. I have much atoning to do, but perhaps some day I shall be known as Grunjak the Good."

"The boils haven't returned, have they?"

"No, my reformation is genuine. I've come to thank you."

"Glad to have been of help. Where are you headed?"

"To the shrine at Campostella. After that, to the Holy Land."

"Well, you're certainly not the old Grunjak."

"I am such a reformed man that I also wish to apologize for attempting to cheat you of your promised fee."

Kedrigern waved his words off. "Don't give it a thought. As a matter of fact, that carpet you gave me was a magic carpet."

"Indeed? I am happy to learn of it. Has the carpet been sold at a great and well-deserved profit to yourself?"

"No. The poor thing hated flying. It's just an ordinary carpet now. It cleaned up very nicely. We've repaired the nail holes and replaced the tassels. It's lying in front of the fireplace, if you'd care to have a look."

"I have forbidden myself the comfort of entering under a roof until my pilgrimage is complete, but I thank you for your kind offer. Your words have gladdened my heart, wizard."

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"Can I offer you anything more, Grunjak? A sip of water and a bit of stale bread hardly seems — "

"No, no, nothing more," said the pilgrim, waving a sun-browned hand. "I must be on my way. So much to atone for, so little time. Farewell, wizard."

As the dusty figure trudged off down the mountain, Kedrigern looked after him with great satisfaction. Here was proof of a job well done. The Grunjak case, undertaken with such reluctance, had turned out to be one of his great successes.

He watched until the pilgrim disappeared around a bend in the road, then he returned to the chair and seated himself once again.

"Time to go inside," he said, with a friendly pat on the chair arm. "Once around the grounds, then to the usual spot in the great room. And mind you keep low going through the doorways, or I'll take the magic off and give it back to Stan. All right, let's lift off."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR COVER STORY IN AUGUST will be a new historical fantasy by R. Garcia y Robertson. "Strongbow" takes us to twelfth-century Wales for a lovely drama of a castle under siege and a ghost with good intentions.

Next month we'll also have on hand the *F&SF* debut of novelist Michael Kandel, who gives us a cautionary tale of the electronic age in "Hooking Up."

Other stories coming soon include works by Scott Bradfield, Lucy Sussex, Michael Shea, Michael Thomas, and a wonderful novella by the trio of James Patrick Kelly, John Kessel, and Jonathan Lethem.

The special 320-page anniversary issue we've been touting all year is almost here, and yes, it will be worth the wait. We've already promised you new stories by Shepard, Le Guin, Silverberg, Wilhelm, Carroll, Goulart, and Ellison. Have we mentioned Terry Bisson's "macs?" Mr. Bisson's story is very short and very sharp. And believe it or not, there are more surprises in store about which we haven't even hinted. Subscribe now to make sure you don't miss this special issue.

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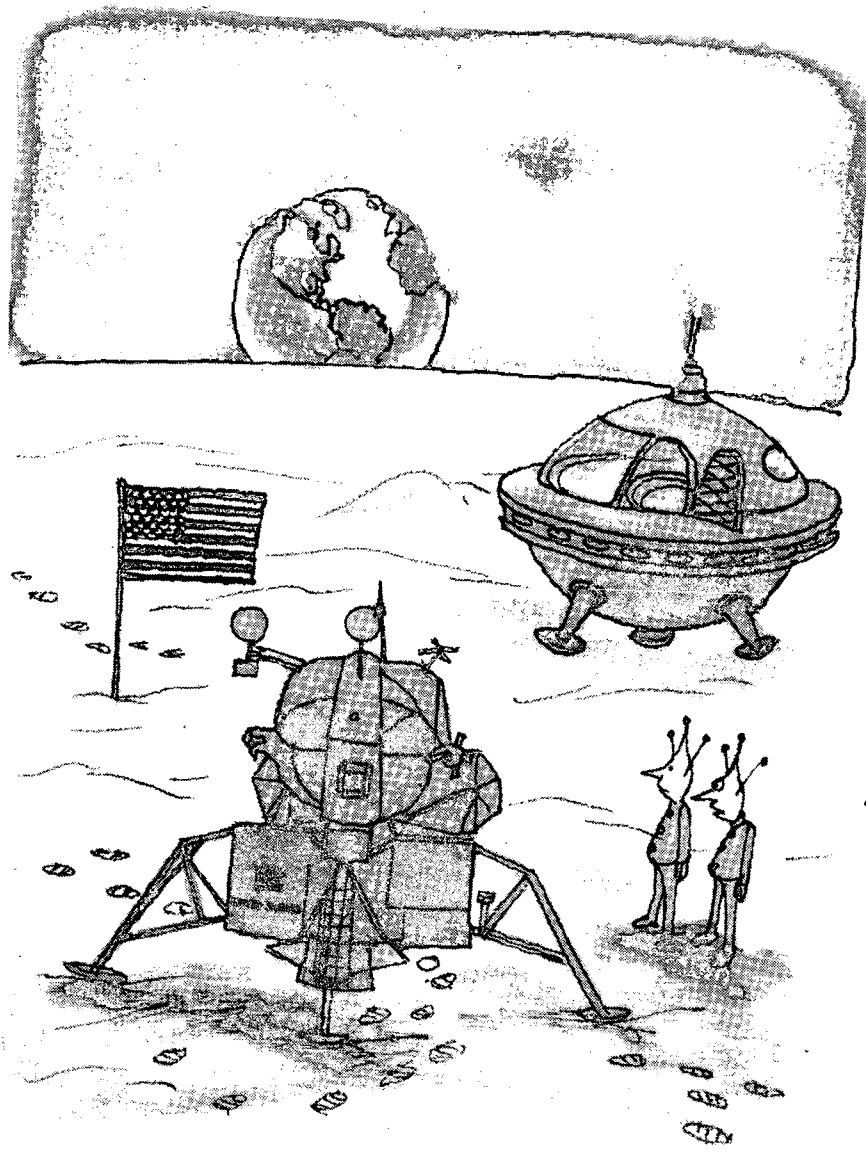

"I think it's safe to say that there used to be life here on the Moon, but that it's now extinct"

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Although he has published more than 250 stories in magazines and anthologies, Steve Rasnic Tem makes his F&SF debut with this story. Mr. Tem is the author of one novel, Excavation, *and has edited two anthologies, but he is best known for his horrific and chilling short stories, of which the following is a fine example.*

Steve Tem lives in Denver with his wife and fellow writer, Melanie. They share a Web site at http://www.m-s-tem.com.

Halloween Street

By Steve Rasnic Tem

HALLOWEEN STREET. NO ONE could remember who had first given it that name. It had no other. There was no street sign, had never been a street sign.

Halloween Street bordered the creek, and there was only one way to get there — over a rickety bridge of rotting wood. Gray timbers had worn partway through the vague red stain. The city had declared it safe only for foot or bike traffic.

The street had only eight houses, and no one could remember more than three of those being occupied at any one time. Renters never lasted long.

It was a perfect place to take other kids — the smaller ones, or the ones a little more nervous than yourself — on Halloween night. Just to give them a little scare. Just to get them to wet their pants.

Most of the time all the houses stayed empty. An old lady had supposedly lived in one of the houses for years, but no one knew anything more about her, except that they thought she'd died there several years before. Elderly twin brothers had once owned the two center houses, each

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with twin high-peaked gables on the second story like skeptical eyebrows, narrow front doors, and small windows that froze over every winter. The brothers had lived there only six months, fighting loudly with each other the entire time.

The houses at the ends of the street were in the worst shape, missing most of their roof shingles and sloughing off paint chips the way a tree sheds leaves. Both houses leaned toward the center of the block, as if two great hands had attempted to squeeze the block from either side. Another three houses had suffered outside fire damage. The blackened boards looked like permanent, arbitrary shadows.

But it was the eighth house that bothered the kids the most. There was nothing wrong with it.

It was the kind of house any of them would have liked to live in. Painted bright white like a dairy so that it glowed even at night, with wide friendly windows and a bright blue roof.

And flowers that grew naturally and a lawn seemingly immune to weeds.

Who took care of it? It just didn't make any sense. Even when the kids guided newcomers over to Halloween Street they stayed away from the white house.

The little girl's name was Laura, and she lived across the creek from Halloween Street. From her bedroom window she could see all the houses. She could see who went there and she could see everything they did. She didn't stop to analyze, or pass judgments. She merely witnessed, and now and then spoke an almost inaudible "Hi" to her window and to those visiting on the other side. An occasional "Hi" to the houses of Halloween Street.

Laura should have been pretty. She had wispy blonde hair so pale it appeared white in most light, worn long down her back. She had small lips and hands that were like gauges to her health: soft and pink when she was feeling good, pale and dry when she was doing poorly.

But Laura was not pretty. There was nothing really wrong about her face: it was just vague. A cruel aunt with a drinking problem used to say that "it lacked character." Her mother once took her to a lady who cut silhouette portraits out of crisp black paper at a shopping mall. Her mother

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paid the lady five dollars to do one of Laura. The lady had finally given up in exasperation, exclaiming "The child has no profile!"

Laura overheard her mother and father talking about it one time. "I see things in her face," her mother had said.

"What do you mean?" Her father always sounded impatient with her mother.

"I don't *know* what I mean! I see things in her face and I can never remember exactly what I saw! Shadows and...white, something so white I feel like she's going to disappear into it. Like clouds...or a snowbank."

Her father had laughed in astonishment. "You're crazy!"

"You know what I mean!" her mother shouted back. "You don't even look at her directly anymore because you *know* what I mean! It's not exactly sadness in her face, not exactly. Just something born with her, something out of place. She was born out of place. My God! She's eleven years old! She's been like this since she was a baby!"

"She's a pretty little girl." Laura could tell her father didn't really mean that.

"What about her eyes? Tell me about her eyes, Dick!"

"What *about* her eyes? She has nice eyes..."

"*Describe* them for me, then! Can you *describe* them? What color are they? What shape?"

Her father didn't say anything. Soon after the argument he'd stomped out of the house. Laura knew he couldn't describe her eyes. Nobody could.

Laura didn't make judgments when other people talked about her. She just listened. And watched with eyes no one could describe. Eyes no one could remember.

No, it wasn't that she was sad, Laura thought. It wasn't that her parents were mean to her or that she had a terrible life. Her parents weren't ever mean to her and although she didn't know exactly what kind of life she had, she knew it wasn't terrible.

She didn't enjoy things like other kids did. She didn't enjoy playing or watching television or talking to the other kids. She didn't *enjoy*, really. She had quiet thoughts, instead. She had quiet thoughts when she pretended to be asleep but was really listening to all her parents' conversations, all their arguments. She had quiet thoughts when she watched people. She had quiet thoughts when people could not describe her eyes.

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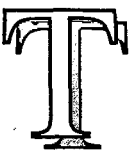
She had quiet thoughts while gazing at Halloween Street, the glowing white house, and all the things that happened there.

She had quiet thoughts pretending that she hadn't been born out of place, that she hadn't been born anyplace at all.

Laura could have been popular, living so close to Halloween Street, seeing it out of her bedroom window. No other kid lived so close or had such a good view. But of course she wasn't popular. She didn't share Halloween Street. She sat at her desk at school all day and didn't talk about Halloween Street at all.



HAT LAST HALLOWEEN Laura got dressed to go out. That made her mother happy — Laura had never gone trick-or-treating before. Her mother had always encouraged her to go, had made or bought her costumes, taken her to parties at church or school, parties the other kids dressed up for: ghosts and vampires and princesses, giggling and running around with their masks like grotesquely swollen heads. But Laura wouldn't wear a costume. She'd sit solemn-faced, unmoving, until her mother finally gave up and took her home. And she'd never go trick-or-treating, never wear a costume.

After she'd told her mother that she wanted to go out that night her mother had driven her around town desperately trying to find a costume for her. Laura sat impassively on the passenger side, dutifully got out at each store her mother took her to, and each time shook her head when asked if she liked each of the few remaining costumes.

"I don't know where else we can try, Laura," her mother said, sorting through a pile of mismatched costume pieces at a drugstore in a mall. "It'll be dark in a couple of hours, and so far you haven't liked a *thing* I've shown you."

Laura reached into the pile and pulled out a cheap face mask. The face was that of a middle-aged woman, or a young man, cheeks and lips rouged a bright red, eye shadow dark as a bruise, eyebrows a heavy and coarse dark line.

"But, honey. Isn't that a little..." Laura shoved the mask into her mother's hand. "Well, all right." She picked up a bundle of bright blue cloth from the table. "How about this pretty robe to go with it?" Laura

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didn't look at the robe. She just nodded and headed for the door, her face already a mask itself.

Laura left the house that night after most of the other trick-or-treaters had come and gone. Her interest in Halloween actually seemed less than ever this year; she stayed in her bedroom as goblins and witches and all manner of stunted, warped creatures came to the front door singly and in groups, giggling and dancing and playing tricks on each other. She could see a few of them over on Halloween Street, not going up to any of the houses but rather running up and down the short street close to the houses in I-dare-you races. But not near as many as in years past.

Now and then her mother would come up and open her door. "Honey, don't you want to leave yet? I swear everybody'll be all out of the goodies if you don't go soon." And each time Laura shook her head, still staring out the window, still watching Halloween Street.

Finally, after most of the other kids had returned to their homes, Laura came down the stairs wearing her best dress and the cheap mask her mother had bought for her.

Her father and mother were in the living room, her mother having retrieved the blue robe from the hall closet.

"She's wearing her best dress, Ann. Besides, it's damned late for her to be going out now."

Her mother eyed her nervously. "I could drive you, honey." Laura shook her head.

"Well, okay, just let me cover your nice dress with the robe. Don't want to get it dirty."

"She's just a *kid,* for chrissake! We can't let her decide!" Her father had dropped his newspaper on the floor. He turned his back on Laura so she wouldn't see his face, wouldn't know how angry he was with both of them. But Laura *knew.* "And that *mask!* Looks like a *whore's* face! Hell, how can she even see? Can't even see her eyes under that." But Laura could see his. All red and sad-looking.

"She's doing something normal for a change," her mother whispered harshly. "Can't you see that? That's more important."

Without a word Laura walked over and pulled the robe out of her mother's arms. After some hesitation, after Laura's father had stomped out of the room, her mother helped her get it on. It was much too large, but

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her mother gasped "How beautiful!" in exaggerated fashion. Laura walked toward the door. Her mother ran to the door and opened it ahead of her. "Have a good time!" she said in a mock cheery voice. Laura could see the near-panic in the eyes above the distorted grin, and she left without saying goodbye.

A few houses down the sidewalk she pulled the robe off and threw it behind a hedge. She walked on, her head held stiff and erect, the mask's rouge shining bright red in the streetlights, her best dress a soft cream color in the dimness, stirred lightly by the breeze. She walked on to Halloween Street.

She stopped on the bridge and looked down into the creek. A young man's face, a middle-aged woman's face gazed back at her out of dark water and yellow reflections. The mouth seemed to be bleeding.

She walked on to Halloween Street. She was the only one there. The only one to see.

She walked on in her best dress and her shiny mask with eyes no one could see.

The houses on Halloween street looked the way they always did, empty and dark. Except for the one that glowed the color of clouds, or snow.

The houses on Halloween Street looked their own way, sounded their own way, moved their own way. Lost in their own quiet thoughts. Born out of place.

You could not see their eyes.

Laura went up to the white house with the neatly trimmed yard and the flowers that grew without care. Its color like blowing snow. Its color like heaven. She went inside.

The old woman gazed out her window as goblins and spooks, pirates and ballerinas crossed the bridge to enter Halloween Street. She bit her lip to make it redder. She rubbed at her ancient, blind eyes, rubbing the dark eyeshadow up into the coarse line of brow. She was not beautiful, but she was not hideous either. Not yet. In any case no one ever remembered her face.

Her fine, snow-white hair was beautiful, and long down her back.

She had the most wonderful house on the street, the only one with

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flowers, the only one that glowed. It was her home, the place where she belonged. All the children, all the children who dared, came to her house every Halloween for treats.

"Come along," she said to the window, staring out at Halloween Street. "Come along," she said, as the treat bags rustled and shifted around her. "You don't remember, do you?" as the first of the giggling goblins knocked at her door. "You've quite forgotten," as the door began to shake from eager goblin fists, eager goblin laughs. "Now scratch your swollen little head, scratch your head. You forgot that first and last, Halloween is for the dead."

SPECULATIONS
AS ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION CONTINUES, MUTATION LEAVE WILL BECOME A STANDARD EMPLOYEE BENEFIT.
HEY! WELCOME BACK, BOB... OR WHATEVER...
hooong

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Our last contribution from Mr. Russo was "Butterflies" in the August 1998 issue. In the past year, most of his efforts have gone into a new novel, Ship of Fools, *which is due out sometime next year. His new story for us concerns a most unusual love triangle on a distant planet.*

Watching Lear Dream

By Richard Paul Russo

AT NIGHT SAMUEL SAT beside his old friend Lear and watched him dream. Lear's dreams manifested in the air above his prone and twisting figure, malformed creatures and almost familiar people and half-living machines that threatened to become fully substantial and take on strange and complicated lives of their own in this world. Samuel, too, had once dreamed dreams like these.

But now he kept watch over his old friend. Kept watch over Lear's dreams. And destroyed those dreams.

Samuel and Lear. They were the last of their kind.

Samuel acted as a gatekeeper, human Cerberus, guarding the natural world from the supernatural. Doing so, he kept Lear alive. Watching over him, preventing the old man's dreams from becoming primed realities loosed and wreaking havoc upon the world, he held back the executioner's axe. As long as Samuel kept Lear's dreams at bay, DivCom allowed Lear to live.

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Lear had once been a DivCom hero. So, too, had Samuel, and the other twenty-seven like them. They had dreamed into existence strange and powerful creatures and superhuman beings, incredible living weapons and organic star-jumping ships, and then, in full control of their creations, directed them against the invading forces of an alien civilization that attacked them from somewhere near the heart of the Milky Way. And they had triumphed.

But the others were all dead now, most of them killed during the conflict, others by accident or old age; two by suicide. Only Samuel and Lear remained, and they were no longer needed, the conflict years ended, no other foreseen. They would have been useless even if needed — Samuel had no more dreams, and Lear had lost all control of his own. Neither was a hero anymore.

For years Samuel kept watch over Lear, fought Lear's dreams, and dispatched every one. For years.

Until the day Lear dreamed Teresa back to life.

DivCom had settled the two of them on a sparsely inhabited world, almost primitive, habitable but lacking exploitable resources. Set them up in a small house several kilometers upstream from a village that straddled a swiftly flowing river which poured over stones and crashed around boulders as it came out of the dark and craggy mountains. Another hundred and fifty kilometers further downstream, the river — much wider and slower by that point — emptied into a vast inland sea. Neither Samuel nor Lear had ever seen the inland sea, and Samuel was certain they never would. He and Lear would live out the rest of their lives in this house, never going much farther than the village. They would die here.

Three people stayed with them at the house, two men and a woman provided by DivCom to cook and clean and garden and maintain the house, to accompany Samuel and Lear on shopping trips into the village — for food and supplies, books and music, clothing and news capsules — and to go with them on those occasions when Lear felt the need to spend an afternoon or evening or both in the local tavern drinking himself into a stupor.

The day Lear dreamed Teresa back to life, Samuel was down by the river, dozing in the shade of a dense tree. The summer air was still and hot,

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but in the shade, so close to the river, it was cool. Samuel was half asleep, and he was almost dreaming.

A normal dream, a human dream, one that would never manifest in the air above him, never threaten to come to life. Fragmented and incoherent, the dream images overlaid the thick and leafy branches above him: red and orange flames, a black vehicle on fire in the snow.... And then he realized Lear was inside the vehicle, screaming through the flames and the black smoke and Samuel knew Lear would be burned alive...

The flames scattered, Lear's face dissolved, then coalesced into Carpentier staring down at him.

"Wake up!" Carpentier was saying. A member of the DivCom contingent, he did most of the cooking and cleaning, a bit of gardening. Errand boy.

Samuel blinked, pushed at Carpentier's arm. "Go away," he said. He wanted his dream back, even the awful dream of Lear burning alive. Any dream.

"It's Lear," Carpentier said. "He's dreaming."

"Now?"

"Now." Nodding his head. "He wanted to take a nap." A shrug. "He's an old man."

Then so am I, thought Samuel. Yet it *was* somehow more true of Lear.

"Hurry!" Carpentier insisted.

But there was no hurry. Samuel got slowly to his feet, brushed leaves from his legs and arms. It was quite possible that Lear's dream creations would fade of their own accord, but even if they didn't, they would need to manifest for several hours before they became difficult to dispatch.

He followed Carpentier back to the house, his head swimming in the heat. Dust puffed up at his feet, and the electric buzz of insect-like creatures oscillated around him like a fan that provided no relief. Samuel walked slowly, eyes half closed, vision bleached, ignoring Carpentier's urgings. He was so tired, of everything.

When they reached the house, Carpentier remained outside with the others — Arturo Langley and Rashida Gamel, both of whom pretended to be occupied with outdoor chores. All three of DivCom's people were afraid of Lear's dreams.

Samuel climbed the creaking wooden steps and stood for a few

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moments in the shade of the large covered porch, readying himself for what he would have to do inside. The house was quiet, the air surrounding it still and just as quiet except for the electric buzz and the hesitant sounds of the DivCom people moving about. He didn't want to go in. He didn't want to do this anymore. But he opened the door and stepped inside.

Inside the house wasn't much cooler, though he could feel the air moving about him, blown by the small, whirring fans in every room. He walked through the entry and down the hall, then stopped outside Lear's room and listened for sounds of the old man's dreaming. Nothing, really — the whisper of sheets, a faint huff of breath. Samuel entered.

He stopped, unable to move.

He had been prepared for almost anything but this.

Life-size, and almost life-like, she hovered in the air above the bed: Teresa.

Teresa had been Lear's wife. And Samuel had betrayed his old friend with her. Together, Samuel and Teresa had both betrayed him.

She was not yet aware of him. It would be an hour or two, maybe longer, before she became substantial enough. Samuel stood just inside Lear's door, watching her. She was talking to someone inside the dream, Lear probably, and her smile didn't seem a happy one; she looked as if she was about to cry.

She looked so young. No older than the day she had died, perhaps even younger, while Lear and Samuel had of course aged. She was wearing loose tan pants and a white short-sleeved shirt, leather sandals on feet still vague and blurred; long sandy hair that shimmered around her face. Then she brought her hand up and tugged at her hair in a gesture so painfully familiar it made Samuel's heart ache.

He knew what he should do. He should dispatch her right now, before this all went too far. And if he couldn't bring himself to do that, then he should wake Lear, as dangerous as that could be for both of them, and hope his waking would destroy her. But he did neither.

He left the room, carefully closing the door. As he came out of the house he went over to Carpentier and Rashida; Arturo was off a ways, watching them.

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"Stay out of the house," Samuel said. "This is going to be a difficult one."

Rashida opened her mouth, but Samuel cut her off before she could say a word. "Everything will be fine," he said. "I'll be back in a little while, when I'm prepared. Just stay out of the house."

Then he turned away from them and headed back toward the river.

He sat on the grassy riverbank, gazing into the swirling white and silver-blue water. The rapids were strong here, but he didn't think they were unnavigable. He wondered about a boat, a canoe, finding one somewhere nearby, maybe down in the village. Then he could risk the river, the rocks and the whirlpools, the heat and the insects and the DivCom people who would come after him once they realized he had gone, once they realized what he had left behind. He could take the boat all the way to the inland sea, and from there...

It wasn't Teresa. He knew that. A simulacrum, an imperfect, incomplete doppelgänger. It was only a thing, unliving and in a way unreal, at least for now.

The last time he had seen Teresa she had been dying...and then dead. He and Lear had both been with her, waiting for her last breath, the last beat of her heart. She had died from a vicious bacterial infection, her pain and mind dulled by analgesics and tropo-opiates. Suffusing her face, though, was an expression that suggested to Samuel a real sense of peace — she was already gone from this world, and was content with that.

But now she was back.

TWO HOURS LATER he returned to the house. The DivCom contingent was still outside, waiting for him. Carpentier approached, but Samuel glared at the man until he backed away without a word.

Just outside Lear's room Samuel stopped and stared at his hands. They were trembling. He felt the trembling all through his body.

He opened the door. Lear was still asleep. Teresa sat on the edge of the bed, her gaze unfocused, but as Samuel entered the room she turned and looked at him, eyes widening.

"Samuel?" Her voice was warped and distorted, as if she was speaking through metallic water.

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He didn't reply. Something about her silently snapped into focus, a solidification, a sharpening of resolution, and she was completely there.

"Samuel?" she said again. This time her voice was almost normal, almost Teresa's.

He still didn't reply. She stood and walked toward him, then reached out and touched his arm with warm dry fingers, and he shivered inside, his chest collapsing in on itself.

"Samuel," she said for the third time, but now there was no question.

Finally his volition returned, along with breath and pulse.

"Yes," he said.

She touched him again and he stepped back.

"Do you know who you are?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. I'm Teresa. Don't you know who *you* are, Samuel?" And she smiled.

"Do you know *what* you are?"

Her smile faded, but she nodded. "I am one of Lear's dreams." She paused, breathing deeply. "But I am still Teresa."

Samuel shook his head, so slowly it seemed the room was moving from side to side. "No. You are only the Teresa that he imagines you are. Or were. Or the Teresa he wanted you to be."

This time it was her turn to shake her head. "You're wrong, Samuel. I am everything he knows about me, whether he liked it or not. He can't change his own knowledge of me."

"It's not that simple. Besides, there were so many things about you that he could never have known. That only you knew. Or I knew. Things that you can't know about yourself because he never knew them."

"Then help me, Samuel. Help me to *become* me. Tell me the things that you know, that Lear never knew."

He turned away from her. This was insane. He needed to bring her under control, and dispatch her before it became too difficult. Except that it was already too difficult.

"Samuel. What would you tell me about myself? What would you tell me that Lear doesn't know?"

He was looking across Lear's sleeping body and out the small window, gazing at the fruit trees behind the house. The reddish-orange fruit, in clusters of three or four tiny spheres, was almost ripe. Another few days

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and the bitterness would be gone and the fruit would be sweet, the thick juice cool and refreshing.

"You were his wife," Samuel said without looking at her. "He was your husband. But *I* loved you too."

"He knows that, Samuel."

Yes, he thought, of course he does. But there was so much more. He turned back to her. "But what he didn't know was that you loved me as well." He paused, his stomach folding, clutching at itself. "And we betrayed him."

"He knows that, too," she said.

"He *knows*?"

Teresa nodded. "I know, and so he must know."

Samuel was too stunned to reply. He looked again at Lear, at the closed eyes and open mouth. His old friend.

"Come," Samuel said. He turned and walked out of the room, and Teresa followed.

He led the way to his own room. It seemed so stark and empty to him now. He hesitated for a few moments, then went to the small closet and opened the door.

"You'll have to stay in here until dark," he said. "They'll try to destroy you if they find out you're still..." What word? "...alive," he finished.

"They might not be able to," she said. And there was something hard and defiant in her voice.

"That's true," he replied. "But they'll try. And they'll kill me, and they'll kill Lear."

She stared at him, as though trying to decide something. "All right," she said, nodding. "And then what?"

"I don't know."

She let out a quiet but harsh laugh and shook her head, but didn't say anything more. They made a place for her to sit in the closet, a nest of his clothing. When she was settled in, he shut the closet door, then walked out of the house and onto the front porch. The three DivCom people were waiting for him.

"It's done," he said.

* * *

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"Something's wrong." Lear spoke quietly, almost hushed. He looked and sounded confused.

"What?" Samuel asked.

Lear just shook his head. Somehow he looked even older this evening, old and frail and lost.

They were eating out on the front porch, the sky mottled with bits of dark crimson, remnants of a sunset long gone. Samuel could see the flickering lights of the village downslope in the distance, and he thought about the walk there in the dark he'd never made before, the one he would have to make later this night.

"A dream I had," Lear finally said.

"What dream?" Breath catching.

Lear shook his head again. There was pain now in the pale blue eyes almost hidden beneath furrowed gray brows. "I can't remember. It's... it's..." The old man's mouth trembled and he blinked his eyes. "Gone," he eventually said, a strange grieving in his voice.

No, Samuel thought. But there was nothing he could say.

They remained on the porch, drinking coffee as complete darkness fell and the stars emerged bright and cool, both of the men lost and confused each in his own private way.

He should have been watching Lear. Lear slept again, tossing fitfully in the hot darkness of his room, more disturbed than usual. But no dreams formed in the air above him, and Samuel returned to his own room.

Teresa was waiting for him, the closet door already open, her eyes aglow in the night. He motioned for silence, and for her to follow him.

Carpentier and Arturo were sleeping, but Rashida was on watch, walking about both inside the house and out. Samuel had her route worked out, and just as Rashida was coming back inside he led Teresa out the back door and around the side of the house, into the small grove of fruit trees. The scent of the fruit hung delicately in the warm night air. The stars provided just enough light for them to make out their footing, and they moved quickly through the trees.

Once they were out of the grove they worked their way across a stretch of rocky ground to the road, which roughly followed the course of the river down to the village.

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"Where are you taking me?" Teresa asked.

"There's a village downstream," he told her. "We'll find a room for you, a place to stay for a few days."

She didn't ask him any more questions, which surprised him, but he was grateful for that. He didn't think he would have had any more answers.

They walked in silence, but her presence enveloped him, as if there was some electrochemical quality to her that charged the air, penetrating his skin. And maybe there was, because of what she was.

As they approached the village, the nearly silent whisper of a breeze and the gurgling of water gave way to the sounds of humanity — voices, faint music, the rumble of motors and clink of glass, cracking, loud hissing — and trees and bushes were replaced by low, scattered buildings and vehicles and lights. A few people were out on the streets walking or pedaling wheeled carts and cycles, and occasionally a motorized vehicle went by, engine incredibly quiet.

The first place they tried, an inn, was full for the night, but further on was a tavern where Lear liked to drink. Behind it, facing the river, were several night rooms. Samuel and Teresa went through the crowded, music-filled tavern and into the back office, where they talked to Marissa. There was a room available on the second floor, and Samuel paid for five nights with local money.

The room was surprisingly quiet, and overlooked the river; the moving water flashed up at them, scales of silver and amber and red. There was a floorbed, a table and chairs, private bath, a balcony. Teresa sat on the end of the bed, but when Samuel walked out onto the balcony, she got up and went with him.

He looked up at the night sky. Besides the stars there was only a tiny, distant moon high in the east, hardly more than a small bright coin in the sky. The only moon this world had. He'd been on worlds with large, almost brilliant moons that, when they were full, lit the night almost like day. He missed that. He missed the roar and the pressure of ships rising from a launch field taking him into space. He missed the sight of a vast, densely populated city at night as he descended over it, the combination of moving and stationary colored lights giving the impression of a living organism pulsing in the dark. He missed so much, but he especially missed the woman whose simulacrum stood beside him now.

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She almost *smelled* like Teresa.

"Stay with me tonight, Samuel."

He turned to her, and her eyes were bright, almost glowing. Maybe they *were* glowing, some strange effect that resulted from her creation. How could he stay with her? She wasn't really Teresa, she wasn't really human.

"Stay with me," she said again.

How could he *not*? Samuel put his arms around her, feeling his breath catch and his heart hesitate, and pulled her tightly to him.

He slept lightly and fitfully, always at least partially aware of her presence beside him, even as he slept. And for the first time in years he dreamed intensely, dreams so vivid and overwhelming it seemed they would never end.

In the morning they ate breakfast at a small outdoor café on the river. Strong hot coffee, fresh rolls and fresh fruit, thick pieces of sweet cheese. The river was quieter in the early morning light, and comforting.

She wasn't Teresa. He knew that now even more than before. But she was close enough. If this went on for long, the differences would become unimportant. No, that wasn't right. The differences were already unimportant; eventually they would cease to exist for him.

"What do we do now?" she asked. She was smiling, as if it didn't matter what he answered. As if she already had something in mind.

"I don't know."

And now she laughed. There was something reckless about her. Teresa, too, had been reckless; it was one of the things that had attracted him to her. If it had been up to him to take the initiative, their affair would never have begun.

"I'd better get back," he told her. He handed her the rest of his local money. "Get what you need, clothes, food, whatever. If you need more money, I'll get it." It was easier to think about practical matters.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"It won't be easy. Late afternoon, if I can."

She reached across the table, took his hand in hers, and gently rubbed his fingers while looking directly at him. Those eyes, still glowing even

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in the light of day. Samuel finally got up, reluctantly pulled his hand away, and left.

No one seemed to have noticed that he'd been gone all night. Rashida asked him where he'd been, and when he said he'd gone into the village for breakfast, that satisfied her.

Lear, apparently, had not dreamed anything new into existence during the night, but he still seemed disturbed and confused. "Walk with me," he said to Samuel.

They walked through the grove of fruit trees, side by side in silence for a while, two old friends with long lives between them. Samuel could already feel the guilt beginning to settle into him, and he knew that, just as before, the guilt would not stop him. Other things might, but not the guilt.

"I feel lost," Lear said. "Something's happened, and I don't know what it is. I feel as if a piece has been carved out of me and devoured." He looked at Samuel and smiled, shaking his head. "I know, I sound like a madman."

Samuel shrugged. He still didn't know what to say to his old friend. There was a wooden bench under the largest of the fruit trees, and Lear led the way to it. He dropped onto the bench with a heavy sigh, and Samuel sat beside him. Lear tipped his head back and gazed up through the leaf- and fruit-filled branches, gazed up at tiny windows of aquamarine sky.

"I miss her," Lear said.

"Who?"

"Teresa. I still miss her after all these years." He lowered his gaze and looked off in the direction of the river, though they couldn't see it from here. "I've been thinking about her a lot."

Which was no surprise to Samuel. But he didn't say anything.

"Do you miss her?" Lear asked, turning to look at him.

Samuel wondered if guilt could appear on his face or in his eyes; would Lear even recognize it if it did?

"Sometimes," he said.

Lear nodded. He continued to stare at Samuel, as though waiting for him to say something, or perhaps trying to come to some decision. But Samuel said nothing, and eventually Lear just shook his head and looked away.

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"I want to be alone," Lear said.

Samuel got up, feeling somehow even guiltier than ever, and walked away, leaving his old friend behind.

As he neared the village, Samuel had to fight the urge to break into a run. He was a young man again, heart and mind battling each other, love and betrayal rekindled, and somehow he didn't care that she wasn't really Teresa, that she was an organic dream creation of the man he was betraying once again. And he couldn't believe he was doing this.

When he arrived at the room, she wasn't there, and panic kicked in. He hurried into the tavern, but she wasn't there, either. Frantic, he ran out into the street, gaze jumping back and forth, whipping about in all directions, but there was still no sign of her anywhere.

He leaned against a wall and closed his eyes, forced himself to calm down and relax. She had to be somewhere nearby. The village wasn't that big, and she could take care of herself, probably better than he could. He opened his eyes and set off down the street, searching for her.

HE FOUND HER across the river at the village airfield. She was sitting in the makeshift open air terminal, watching a small jumper plane preparing for takeoff. He sat beside her, and she took his hand in hers; her skin was warm and dry and her touch was almost electric.

"Let's go away," she said, not looking at him, still watching the plane. "We can take a jumper to Aleron City and the space port, then we get a ship off this world and start over again somewhere. Without Lear, without the DivCom people." She turned to him, eyes sparkling with her smile. "Just the two of us, Samuel."

He started to ask her if she was serious, but he knew she was. So he just shook his head, a strange fear growing inside him.

"I can't," he said. "They won't let me leave this place. They certainly won't let me leave this world."

"We'll find a way." Spoken with absolute certainty.

"It's not that simple."

"It is," she said. "If you want it. We'll find a way."

"What about Lear? They'll kill him."

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"No, they won't." But there wasn't the certainty in her voice this time, and she looked away from him. "They'll figure out something else. Drugs, maybe, to keep him from dreaming. Something like that."

Samuel shook his head.

"There's no other way," she said. "You have to realize that. How long will it be before they discover what's happened? Before someone finds out about me?" She turned back to him. "I love you, Samuel, and if you love me...." But she left it unfinished.

He looked into her eyes, deep into those dark and shining eyes, and had no answer for her.

He spent the days with Teresa, and the nights with Lear.

Leading two lives again, as he had so many years ago, and knowing that this time it couldn't go on for very long before something disastrous occurred. But knowing that didn't change a thing.

"Teresa is alive!" Lear staggered up the steps of the front porch, flushed and out of breath. He held onto the railing for support and said, "She's alive."

Samuel didn't respond. Fear caught his breath. Could Lear really have seen her?

Still breathing hard, his gray hair wild about his head, Lear pushed away from the railing and sat across the table from Samuel. Sweat rolled from his forehead, but his eyes glittered with life and madness. He picked up Samuel's iced drink, brought it to his mouth, and drained the entire glass. He set the glass down, dug out some ice and pressed it against his face.

"She was in the village," he finally said. "I saw her."

"It couldn't be," Samuel said. "Someone who looked like Teresa, that's all. Teresa's dead."

"No." Lear shook his head, adamant.

"We saw her die, remember? We were there."

"No," Lear said again. "I called out her name and she turned, and when she saw me her face lit up and she said my name. She knew me." He paused, confusion distorting his expression. "Then she suddenly seemed frightened, and she ran off into the crowds. I tried to follow, but I lost her."

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"You're imagining things, my old friend." Samuel leaned forward and looked steadily into Lear's eyes. "We both lost her years ago." And immediately regretted saying it, knowing it was exactly the wrong thing to say.

Lear's expression darkened. He stood slowly, gaze never leaving Samuel. "Still the same," he said. "You can't stand it. You never had her to lose. She was mine. She's alive, 'old friend.' And you won't have her this time, either."

He turned away and hobbled down the porch steps, back into the heat and the sun, leaving Samuel alone and afraid.

"Why did you answer him?" Samuel asked.

They were sitting at the table inside her room, drinking coffee, watching and listening to the afternoon thundershower that did little to ease the day's heat.

"It was an automatic response," she answered, not looking at him. "My name being called out like that, I just reacted."

"No," he said. "You can't get away with that. He told me that you saw him, then called out his name."

Her head came around fast and she glared at him with angry defiance. "He's my husband."

"He's not...." But then Samuel stopped. What was the point? It didn't matter what he said to her, she would do and say and think as she wanted. And she refused to believe that she wasn't as much Teresa as the real Teresa had been. "He's old," Samuel said, "and his mind doesn't work right anymore, but he'll figure it out."

"Figure *what* out?" she asked, still defiant, daring him to say it.

"What you are."

And then a smile appeared, joining the defiance. "And what am I, Samuel?" When he didn't answer, she got up and went to him, took his hands in hers and pulled him to his feet, then led him to the bed. "*Who* am I, Samuel?"

"Teresa," he whispered, and wrapped his arms around her, breathing deeply of her scent which only intensified as he felt her lips on his neck and cheek, her hands gripping his shoulder and back. "Teresa."

* * *

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Samuel sat out on the balcony, gaze only vaguely focused on the water rushing past below him, the swirl and spray almost hypnotic. Teresa was asleep in the room, and he thought he could feel that electric buzz of her presence even out here.

I'm losing control, he thought to himself. And then almost laughed aloud at the absurdity. He'd never really *had* any control over what was happening now. Not one bit since Lear had dreamed her back to life.

He looked into the room through the open doorway. Teresa, sprawled naked on top of the bed, seemed perfectly at ease, unconcerned about a thing. She would leave soon. With or without him, she would leave.

He returned his gaze to the river. The heat from the sun overhead baked all energy from his limbs. Which was, he thought, as it should be. There was nothing he could do but wait for it to happen.

He sat on the porch in the afternoon heat, a strip of sun on his bare ankles, almost burning his skin. He was drinking iced coffee and reading, and he was waiting for Lear to return from the village. He set the book down and gazed along the path that led to the road, but there were no signs of Lear.

Rashida Gamel came out of the house and stood next to the table, looking down on Samuel.

"I don't like this," she said.

"What?"

"Lear's excursions into the village. Something's going on, and I don't like it. Especially since he always insists on going alone."

Samuel shook his head. "But you always send Carpentier or Arturo to follow him, don't you? You know where he goes, what he does. He's not trying to 'escape,' is he?"

"We don't know *what* he's doing. He seems to be searching for something. Or someone."

"Ask him," Samuel suggested.

"I have. He doesn't answer."

Samuel smiled, though he was certain that would annoy her. "He's an old man," he said. As if that would somehow explain it all.

Rashida frowned at him, but didn't say anything more. Something caught her attention and she looked toward the road. Samuel followed her

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gaze and saw Lear shuffling along the roadway, looking tired and dejected. Lear turned up the path, dust kicking up from his feet, and walked toward them. When he reached the porch he climbed the steps without once looking at Rashida or Samuel, then went into the house.

Rashida remained on the porch until Arturo appeared on the road. As he came up the path he looked at Rashida and shrugged, shaking his head. Then he, too, climbed the porch steps and went inside.

"I don't like it," Rashida said once again. Then she turned and followed the others into the house.

HALF AN HOUR later, Samuel was on the road to the village, and so preoccupied he hardly noticed his surroundings. Rashida worried him. Her suspicions would probably never be allayed, and he suspected it wouldn't be long before she had Arturo or Carpentier following *him* as well. And Lear worried him, with his foul moods and his own suspicions, his daily trips into the village searching for Teresa. Samuel had warned her, but he didn't trust her to be careful. Right now *everything* worried him, particularly since it seemed there was nothing he could do about any of it.

Dark, heavy clouds scudded in overhead, bringing with them a damp and electric feel to the air. There was a silent, generalized flash sheeting across the clouds, then a few seconds later came a crash of thunder that rumbled quickly away. A few seconds more, and the rain started.

He was on the outskirts of the village, and he broke into a halting trot, hugging the few scattered buildings, stopping for a few moments whenever there was complete shelter and catching his breath before plunging back into the rain. He found it all strangely exhilarating.

He was soaking wet by the time he reached the tavern, where he finally slowed to a walk as he went around back. As he climbed the stairs to the second floor, the rain let up a little, became a drizzle washing across his face; he stopped outside Teresa's door and, tilting his head back, opened his mouth to the water.

He was still standing like that when Teresa opened the door. She smiled. "Look at you," she said. Then she took his arm and gently pulled him inside.

In the bathroom, he took off all his clothes and hung them in the

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shower, then dried off with towels, wrapping one around his waist like a skirt. He looked at himself in the mirror, suddenly dismayed. *I'm an old man, too.* The hair on his chest was almost completely white, coarse and kinked; the outline of his ribcage was distinct; and the skin under his neck was beginning to sag. Deep lines fanned out from his eyes.

What did she see in him? He had no idea.

When he came out of the bathroom, Teresa had coffee ready, made in a small steamer she'd bought. She handed a cup to him and said, "We need to talk."

An ache mushroomed in his chest, then dropped into his gut, but he nodded. They went out onto the balcony, which was sheltered from the rain, and sat facing each other. Samuel drank from his coffee, then set it under the chair.

"What is it?" he asked her.

Teresa shook her head. "The same thing, Samuel. We can't keep this going. Lear coming into the village every day looking for me. You coming later, for just a few hours, then going back to keep watch over his dreams. It's time, Samuel."

He didn't answer. He knew she was right, but he still didn't know what to do. The choice was simple enough.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I *have* to, Samuel. I can't stay here any longer. Not in this town, not on this world. This isn't the life I want, the life I *need.* And I can't risk it any longer, that DivCom will find out about me. You said it before, they'll try to destroy me if they know." She paused. "So I'm leaving. I want you with me, Samuel. But if you choose to stay, I'll go without you."

He knew she wasn't bluffing, and he knew she was right to go. The risks were growing every day, and there was little they could do about them.

"What are you going to do, Samuel?"

Thunder cracked and rumbled, but he hadn't seen the lightning. The rain intensified again, becoming a darker, louder curtain between the balcony and the river.

"I don't know," he finally said.

"You have to decide," she told him. "Today. Before you leave." She drank slowly from her coffee, as though savoring it. "I won't be here tomorrow."

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A simple choice. Go with Teresa, or stay with Lear.

What would DivCom do if he went? As long as they didn't know about Teresa, they might just let him go. But what would they do to Lear?

Samuel looked out through the pouring rain at the river gone almost completely gray, only hints of pale blue occasionally winking up at him from the water.

What did he owe Lear? What did he owe to this woman, this Teresa simulacrum who only existed because of what he hadn't done? And what did he owe to himself?

The front door opened and Lear staggered into the room. His hair was wet and wild about his head and his eyes were just as wild, shifting crazily from side to side until he saw Teresa and Samuel out on the balcony. Samuel stared at Lear through the open doorway as if the old man were an apparition, not quite believing Lear had found them, and yet not quite surprised either.

Lear slowly crossed the room and stopped in the doorway, looking back and forth between Teresa and Samuel. Teresa set her coffee at her feet and stood, gazing steadily at Lear. Samuel remained seated — not out of paralysis, but more out of a strange inertia, as though all of this no longer had much to do with him. This was between Lear and Teresa now.

"I knew you were alive," Lear said.

"Yes," Teresa replied. "I'm alive."

"All this time..." Lear shook his head as he spoke, and Samuel wondered what Lear meant — did he really think Teresa had been alive all these years? "All this time," Lear continued, "you were with him."

"Yes."

"Just like before."

"Yes."

Lear turned to Samuel. "I knew before," he said. "I knew, but I loved you almost as much as I loved her, and so I said...nothing. I let it go on, even though it was tearing me up inside. I let it go on because...because...." He shook his head again, then reared it backward, letting out a loud, chopped laugh. He lowered his head and gazed out at the river. "Because I was a fool."

No one said anything for a long time. A faint flash washed across the gray-black clouds, and it was several seconds before a quiet rumble reached them.

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"Storm's moving on," Lear said. Then he looked at Teresa. "I won't be a fool this time," he told her.

"You will always be a fool," Teresa said. And Samuel thought she was as mad as Lear.

"No," Lear responded. "Not this time." Then he cocked his head, staring as if he'd just noticed something about her for the first time.

Samuel grew suddenly afraid, and the fear shivered through him.

"I know what you are," Lear eventually said. He turned to Samuel. "You let her live."

Samuel didn't reply. He tried to stand, but now found himself unable to move. Everything was out of his control.

Turning back to Teresa, Lear said, "I won't let this happen again."

"You don't have any choice," she told him, that defiance in her voice, daring him.

"This time you're wrong," he said.

And then Samuel knew what Lear was going to do. The fear notched up inside him and he abruptly stood, knocking over his chair and kicking his coffee over the edge of the balcony. But it was too late.

Teresa, too, seemed to realize what Lear was going to do, and she stepped back, but there was nowhere for her to go.

Lear lunged and wrapped his arms around her. They crashed against the balcony railing, and for a moment Samuel thought the two of them were going over, but Lear managed to pull back from the railing while maintaining his hold on Teresa. She struggled in his arms, twisting and squirming, but he was too strong. If anything, Lear tightened his hold on her.

A glow appeared between Teresa and Lear, shimmering wherever their bodies made contact. As Samuel stepped forward, sparks began to arc out from the glow with tiny crackling sounds. He reached out to grab Lear, intending to pull him away from her, but he was knocked backward by a tremendous jolt, like energy fields explosively repelling each other.

He lost consciousness. Probably only for a few seconds. When he came to, he was on his back, staring up at the overhang that sheltered the balcony from the worst of the storm; scattered raindrops blew in across his face.

He raised his head and saw Teresa still struggling, still without success. The glow intensified and the sparking increased. Lear held on,

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mouth open and teeth bared, his eyes almost luminescent within the shimmering glow that now surrounded the two of them.

Suddenly Teresa stopped struggling. She hung limply in Lear's arms, and turned to Samuel. She had that expression on her face once again, the one from the earlier time she was dying — acceptance and peace, a readiness to leave this world.

But Samuel wasn't ready for her to leave. He struggled to his feet and watched in a shattering grief as she turned back to Lear and embraced him. She screamed once, and burst into a cascading shower of sparks, like a human fireworks display. Lear, too, screamed, and arms flailing he fell backward into the room.

Silence. Silence and smoke and the stench of burned flesh.

She was gone.

No, not silence. There was still the rain, spattering on the overhang, hissing into the river.

Samuel looked over at the spot where they had struggled, searching for signs of her — a piece of charred clothing, or a sandal, a ring, something...*anything*. But there was nothing, and he thought he could feel his heart coming apart.

When he finally could move again, he stepped into the room and looked down at Lear. The old man's flesh was singed in several places, but he had managed to pull himself to his hands and knees. He looked up at Samuel for a moment, then leaned back on his haunches, buried his face in his hands and began to sob.

Samuel walked past him without a word, went into the bathroom and put on his cold, damp clothes. Then he came out, crossed the room without looking at Lear, and stepped outside. The rain was lighter now, warm and misting, creating a hushed quiet in the air. He pulled the door closed behind him, then started down the stairs.

The canoe drifted near the middle of the river, the slow, wide current taking him toward the inland sea. The sun was low in the western sky to his left, but the day was still hot. Samuel held the wide-bladed oar across his knees and watched the makeshift piers slip past him on his right as he continued to drift downstream. There was a town here at the mouth of the river, but he wouldn't stop; he needed to go farther.

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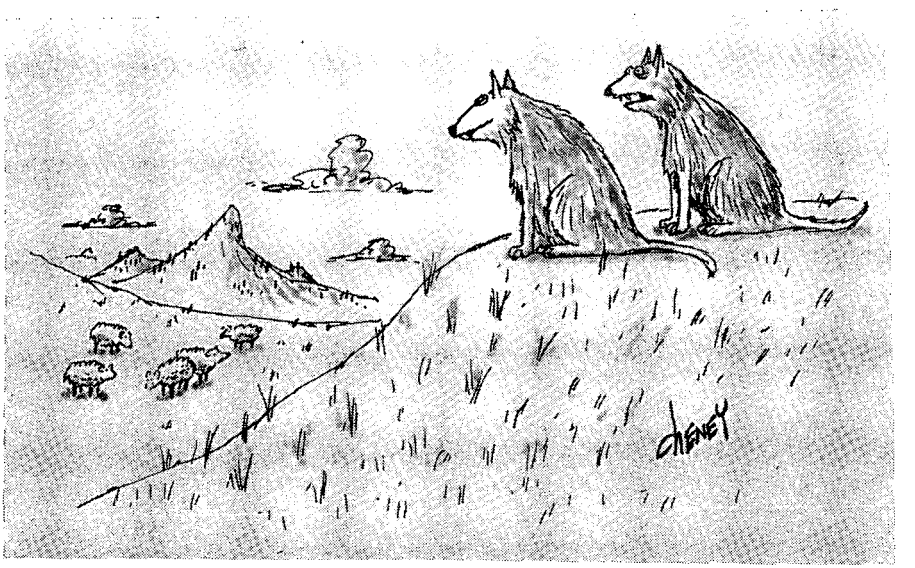
Would he have gone with her? He still didn't know the answer to that question, and suspected he never would, but he was content with that, and he didn't think a lot about it anymore. He didn't think much about Lear, either, and what DivCom might have done to him. The old man was either still alive, or he wasn't. It didn't concern Samuel anymore.

The canoe bobbed in the water as the river met the gentle swells of the inland sea. Directly ahead of him, as far as he could see, was a vast expanse of water, tiny wavelets flashing golden orange and red reflections of the sun into his eyes. Another world, another life, it seemed, was out there for him. There were, he understood, small towns and villages scattered all along the shores of the sea. One of them would be the right place for him, the right place to stop.

As he drifted past the spit of land that marked the boundary of river and sea, he saw a few boats out in the water, others pulled up on the beach, and people on shore, some apparently watching him. He dug his oar into the water and headed east, away from the setting sun.



"I'm not very hungry, but I could sure use another tranquilizer dart."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

And I Think to Myself, What a Wonderful World

"I believe *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* appeals to me because in it one finds refuge and release from everyday life. We are all little children at heart and find comfort in a dream world, and these episodes in the magazine encourage our building castles in space."

—Louis Armstrong, rear-cover endorsement, *F&SF*, circa 1964.

FROM backstage at the Newport Jazztopian Festival of 1965, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Jazztopian Fiction*, heard the ecstatic roar of the crowd and smiled. The band now departing the stage — The *Amazing* Herd, under the charismatic leadership of Editor Woody Herman — was going to be a hard act to follow. That little cat on drums, Ray Palmer, was a pint-sized dynamo. But Satchmo continued to grin broadly, confidence flowing almost visibly from his bulky suited form. The lineup he was going to bring onstage was one of the strongest he had ever fronted, even going way back to the early glory days of the Hot Five. Armstrong was certain that his band would wow the crowd today, just as the magazine he headed wowed its readers monthly.

An arm fell around Satchmo's shoulder, and he turned to face the festival's organizer, George Wein.

"Any butterflies, Dippermouth?" joshed Wein, using Armstrong's oldest nickname.

"No, sir," growled Armstrong in his famous rumble. "We're fixin' to turn Newport Harbor into steam. Serve up some fine music and cooked lobster all at once."

Wein released Armstrong and his face grew serious. "Who'd have thought we'd ever find ourselves

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doing what we love again, huh, Louis? During all those bad years, the whole Noteless Decade, it seemed impossible that our music would ever flourish again."

"Don't forget the fiction, too, George. We can't neglect the other half of the Jazztopian program. Only solidarity got us through the hard times and brought us to where we are today."

"True, true. But you're more heavily into the written stuff than me. The music's always been my first concern."

"You got to keep the lesson of the camps in mind though, George. If we don't hang together, we hang separately."

Wein shook his head ruefully. "The camps. Nothing seems hard after them, does it?"

"No, sir, it sure don't."

And Armstrong cast his mind back some twenty-odd years to that convulsive time—so horrible while ongoing, yet a blessing in retrospect.

In early 1942, during the grimmest days of the Second World War, when the Allied cause looked doomed, the worst possible thing that could have happened to the U.S.A. — not excluding the previous year's massacre at Pearl Harbor — had occurred: President Roosevelt was assassinated by a lone gunman. The assassin, who died almost immediately under return fire from the Secret Service, was quickly identified, his prints on file from a series of minor robbery and vagrancy arrests. One William Burroughs, dope fiend, petty thief, wastrel, and, incongruously, black-sheep scion of an industrial dynasty. On the assassin's body and in his tawdry apartment had been found extensive scribblings. Burroughs's writings spoke of a vast conspiracy involving jazz men, hobos, pulp writers, and other mysterious lowlife figures, a conspiracy bent on subverting all authority from the highest levels on down. Some held that these manuscripts were plainly the hallucinatory work of a madman; others that they were a viable blueprint for an actual attempt by anarchists to overthrow the country.

The government of the United States, faced with attack from abroad, could not take a chance on subversion from within. Less than a week after Roosevelt's death, pursuant to special orders from President Truman, the nationwide roundup of all the suspicious types delineated in Burroughs's manuscripts had begun. By the thousands, musicians, writers, artists, and

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tramps were swiftly corralled and sent to the same detention camps that already held — much to the surprise of the uninformed newcomers — innocent, law-abiding Japanese-Americans.

Armstrong had been in the studio, cutting a record with Bing Crosby, when their arrest came down. He and Bing hadn't been allowed even to pack or call their families before being hustled onto a westbound train. (Apparently, Armstrong's trip to Europe in 1933 rendered him particularly suspect.) Armstrong hadn't felt this crummy since he was sent to the Colored Waif's School at age twelve. Arriving at an Arizona camp exploding with construction by WPA crews in order to hold the new influx of prisoners, Satchmo resigned himself to a few weeks of being held hostage to the nation's fears. Surely this whole mess would soon be straightened out.

After the first six months of confinement, he realized his sanguine expectations might be due for revision. But even then no one quite believed that their internment could possibly last some ten years.

Life in the camp sorted itself out after an initial period into something quite different from what the authorities had intended. The prisoners were allowed by a manpower-short federal government to manage their own affairs with minimal supervision, and soon the camp was humming with organized activities. By cooping up so many creative, talented people, the government had inadvertently created a hothouse environment where ideas and enthusiasms bred like bacteria. "The swing tanks" was what the camps eventually came to be called by their inmates, and by the few citizens on the outside of the fences who heard dribs and drabs of whispered leaked information.

Acquiring musical instruments through bribery or Red Cross charity, the musicians among the prisoners swiftly fell into both new and old groupings prone to jamming nearly all their waking hours. By similar licit or illicit means the writers incarcerated in the swing tanks glommed onto typewriters and mimeographs and continued their interrupted work, mainly in the speculative and noir genres. And painters likewise with their tools.

But neither the musicians nor the writers nor the painters any longer maintained suspicious barriers between their clans. Forced to mingle by proximity, they found stimulation, enlightenment, and inspiration in the media different

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from their own. Many laid down their pens and took up trumpets, and vice versa. And from the assorted tramps, bums, addicts, and hobos came an underclass perspective on national affairs that many of the middle-class artists might never have otherwise encountered.

Thus, in parallel with their secret Manhattan Project elsewhere, the Feds had accidentally built in the swing tanks a system for high-gear cultural cross-pollination.

As best as Satchmo now recalled, it was during the third year of their imprisonment that someone coined the term "jazztopia" for the ideal state toward which all of the prisoners were striving with their art. Maybe Duke Ellington had come up with the term, maybe Dave Brubeck. It could have fallen from the lips of Woody Guthrie or Cyril Kornbluth. Whoever the originator, the term spread like wildfire. Within weeks, there appeared "The Jazztopian Manifesto," penned by a team consisting of Henry Kuttner, Thelonius Monk, Mezz Mezzrow, Fred Pohl, and Billie Holiday. Signed by nearly every inmate of the swing tanks, the proclamation became the Jazztopian Declaration of Independence.

Outside the swing tanks, the global war had stalemated. Truman was not the strategist Roosevelt had been (although historians later attributed much of the military inertia to a national lassitude stemming from a dearth of entertainers other than a few goodie-goodie quislings such as Kate Smith, Bob Hope, and L. Ron Hubbard). In the elections of 1948, the electorate replaced Truman with Eisenhower, a popular ex-general invalided out of active service after the failure of D-Day. Eisenhower pressed the scientists of the Manhattan Project for a breakthrough (one of the key figures of the Project, Richard Feynman, had been sent to the swing tanks for his bongo-playing, leaving the Project fumbling), and success finally came in 1951, bringing a decisive end to the war. But at his moment of triumph, Eisenhower was swept up in scandal, caught having an affair with his secretary, Kay Tarrant. Outraged, the voters in 1952 carried Adlai Stevenson into the Oval Office. Liberal Stevenson immediately used his mandate and the new peacetime conditions to dissolve the swing tanks.

Out into the general populace burst the Jazztopians, burning to bring their optimistic, speculative visions in words and music to the rest of the nation. They infected the country like a virus never before

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encountered by the body politic's immune system.

The 1950s, "The Swinging Fifties," were the biggest renaissance in the nation's history. The domestic economy soared, global reconstruction got underway, and the soundtrack was Jazztopian music. Jazztopian speculative literature, marching forward arm-in-arm with the music, blossomed. Scores of magazines were born or reborn, the masthead of each boasting a musician as the nominal (sometimes actual) editor. There was *Astounding* with Guy Lombardo; *Unknown* with Charlie Parker; *Galaxy* with Sun Ra; *Planet Stories* with Benny Goodman; *Infinity* with Glenn Miller; and of course, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Jazztopian Fiction*, helmed by Louis Armstrong.

Open-air festivals became the favored tribal gatherings of the Jazztopians and their enormous flock of fans, replacing stuffy literary gatherings and smoky non-literate night-clubs. And the Newport gathering was perhaps the most prestigious.

Satchmo's reverie ended as his bandmates surged past him, heading for the stage. Each one, youngster and old friend, gave him a high five as they bustled by him. Armstrong let them take their positions. He made sure he had his big white handkerchief ready. When he heard the band start to vamp to "Jeepers Creepers," he strolled onstage.

The crowd went wild. Satchmo held his hands up for quiet, surveying the spectators, noting the various booths set up to sell Jazztopian literature and art. When the fans finally settled down, Armstrong picked up his trumpet.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. I suspect that the President and Jackie can hear you all the way 'cross the bay at Hammersmith Farm!"

The crowd roared again at the mention of the ever-popular second-term President. When they quieted once more, Satchmo said, "Let me introduce the *F&JF* band first. On drums, Mister Eddie Ferman! On bass, Mister Chip Delany! On sax, Mister Roger Zelazny! On vibes, Mister Gary Burton! On keyboards, Mister Chick Corea! On clarinet, Mister Barry Malzberg! And for our first tune, we're gonna hear an old favorite —

"'Hello, Hugo!'"

Satchmo put embouchure to lips and began to play.

For a sixty-five-year-old editor, he could still blow one mean horn!

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This story marks Robert Reed's third appearance in our pages this year: first he showed us a modern-day prophet in "Will Be," then he led us into the gridiron with "Game of the Century," now he...well, it's not giving too much away to say this one's about a time when politeness is suspicious behavior.

Winemaster

By Robert Reed

THE STRANGER PULLED INTO the Quik Shop outside St. Joe. Nothing was remarkable about him, which was why he caught Blaine's eye. Taller than average, but not much, he was thin in an unfit way, with black hair and a handsome, almost pretty face, fine bones floating beneath skin that didn't often get into the sun. Which meant nothing, of course. A lot of people were staying indoors lately. Blaine watched him climb out of an enormous Buick — a satin black '17 Gibraltar that had seen better days — and after a lazy long stretch, he passed his e-card through the proper slot and inserted the nozzle, filling the Buick's cavernous tank with ten cold gallons of gasoline and corn alcohol.

By then, Blaine had run his plates.

The Buick was registered to a Julian Winemaster from Wichita, Kansas; twenty-nine accompanying photographs showed pretty much the same fellow who stood sixty feet away.

His entire bio was artfully bland, rigorously seamless. Winemaster was an accountant, divorced and forty-four years old, with O negative

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blood and five neo-enamel fillings imbedded in otherwise perfect teeth, plus a small pink birthmark somewhere on his right buttock. Useless details, Blaine reminded himself, and with that he lifted his gaze, watching the traveler remove the dripping nozzle, then cradling it on the pump with the overdone delicacy of a man ill-at-ease with machinery.

Behind thick fingers, Blaine was smiling.

Winemaster moved with a stiff, road-weary gait, walking into the convenience store and asking, "Ma'am? Where's your rest room, please?"

The clerk ignored him.

It was the men's room that called out, "Over here, sir."

Sitting in one of the hard plastic booths, Blaine had a good view of everything. A pair of militia boys in their brown uniforms were the only others in the store. They'd been gawking at dirty comic books, minding their own business until they heard Winemaster's voice. Politeness had lately become a suspicious behavior. Blaine watched the boys look up and elbow each other, putting their sights on the stranger. And he watched Winemaster's walk, the expression on his pretty frail face, and a myriad of subtleties, trying to decide what he should do, and when, and what he should avoid at all costs.

It was a bright warm summer morning, but there hadn't been twenty cars in the last hour, most of them sporting local plates.

The militia boys blanked their comics and put them on the wrong shelves, then walked out the front door, one saying, "Bye now," as he passed the clerk.

"Sure," the old woman growled, never taking her eyes off a tiny television screen.

The boys might simply be doing their job, which meant they were harmless. But the state militias were full of bullies who'd found a career in the last couple years. There was no sweeter sport than terrorizing the innocent traveler, because of course the genuine refugee was too rare of a prospect to hope for.

Winemaster vanished into the men's room.

The boys approached the black Buick, doing a little dance and showing each other their malicious smiles. Thugs, Blaine decided. Which meant that he had to do something now. Before Winemaster, or whoever he was, came walking out of the toilet.

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Blaine climbed out of the tiny booth.

He didn't waste breath on the clerk.

Crossing the greasy pavement, he watched the boys using a police-issue lock pick. The front passenger door opened, and both of them stepped back, trying to keep a safe distance. With equipment that went out of date last spring, one boy probed the interior air, the cultured leather seats, the dashboard and floorboard and even an empty pop can standing in its cradle. "Naw, it's okay," he was saying. "Get on in there."

His partner had a knife. The curled blade was intended for upholstery. Nothing could be learned by ripping apart the seats, but it was a fun game nonetheless.

"Get in there," the first boy repeated.

The second one started to say, "I'm getting in — " But he happened to glance over his shoulder, seeing Blaine coming, and he turned fast, lifting the knife, seriously thinking about slashing the interloper.

Blaine was bigger than some pairs of men.

He was fat, but in a powerful, focused way. And he was quick, grabbing the knife hand and giving a hard squeeze, then flinging the boy against the car's composite body, the knife dropping and Blaine kicking it out of reach, then giving the boy a second shove, harder this time, telling both of them, "That's enough, gentlemen."

"Who the fuck are you — ?" they sputtered, in a chorus.

Blaine produced a badge and ID bracelet. "Read these," he suggested coldly. Then he told them, "You're welcome to check me out. But we do that somewhere else. Right now, this man's door is closed and locked, and the three of us are hiding. Understand?"

The boy with the surveillance equipment said, "We're within our rights."

Blaine shut and locked the door for them, saying, "This way. Stay with me."

"One of their nests got hit last night," said the other boy, walking. "We've been checking people all morning!"

"Find any?"

"Not yet — "

"With that old gear, you won't."

"We've caught them before," said the first boy, defending his equipment. His status. "A couple, three different carloads..."

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Maybe they did, but that was months ago. Generations ago.

"Is that yours?" asked Blaine. He pointed to a battered Python, saying, "It better be. We're getting inside."

The boys climbed in front. Blaine filled the back seat, sweating from exertion and the car's brutal heat.

"What are we doing?" one of them asked.

"We're waiting. Is that all right with you?"

"I guess."

But his partner couldn't just sit. He turned and glared at Blaine, saying, "You'd better be Federal."

"And if not?" Blaine inquired, without interest.

No appropriate threat came to mind. So the boy simply growled and repeated himself. "You'd just better be. That's all I'm saying."

A moment later, Winemaster strolled out of the store. Nothing in his stance or pace implied worry. He was carrying a can of pop and a red bag of corn nuts. Resting his purchases on the roof, he punched in his code to unlock the driver's door, then gave the area a quick glance. It was the glance of someone who never intended to return here, even for gasoline — a dismissive expression coupled with a tangible sense of relief.

That's when Blaine knew.

When he was suddenly and perfectly sure.

The boys saw nothing incriminating. But the one who'd held the knife was quick to say the obvious: A man with Blaine's credentials could get his hands on the best EM sniffers in the world. "Get them," he said, "and we'll find out what he is!"

But Blaine already felt sure.

"He's going," the other one sputtered. "Look, he's gone — !"

The black car was being driven by a cautious man. Winemaster braked and looked both ways twice before he pulled out onto the access road, accelerating gradually toward I-29, taking no chances even though there was precious little traffic to avoid as he drove north.

"Fuck," said the boys, in one voice.

Using a calm-stick, Blaine touched one of the thick necks; without fuss, the boy slumped forward.

"Hey!" snapped his partner. "What are you doing — ?"

"What's best," Blaine whispered afterward. Then he lowered the

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Python's windows and destroyed its ignition system, leaving the pair asleep in the front seats. And because the moment required justice, he took one of their hands each, shoving them inside the other's pants, then he laid their heads together, in the pose of lovers.

THE OTHER REFUGEES pampered Julian: His cabin wasn't only larger than almost anyone else's, it wore extra shielding to help protect him from malicious high-energy particles. Power and shaping rations didn't apply to him, although he rarely indulged himself, and a platoon of autodocs did nothing but watch over his health. In public, strangers applauded him. In private, he could select almost any woman as a lover. And in bed, in the afterglow of whatever passed for sex at that particular moment, Julian could tell his stories, and his lovers would listen as if enraptured, even if they already knew each story by heart.

No one on board was more ancient than Julian. Even before the attack, he was one of the few residents of the Shawnee Nest who could honestly claim to be DNA-made, his life beginning as a single wet cell inside a cavernous womb, a bloody birth followed by sloppy growth that culminated in a vast and slow and decidedly old-fashioned human being.

Julian was nearly forty when Transmutations became an expensive possibility.

Thrill seekers and the terminally ill were among the first to undergo the process, their primitive bodies and bloated minds consumed by the microchines, the sum total of their selves compressed into tiny robotic bodies meant to duplicate every normal human function.

Being pioneers, they endured heavy losses. Modest errors during the Transmutation meant instant death. Tiny errors meant a pathetic and incurable insanity. The fledging Nests were exposed to heavy nuclei and subtle EM effects, all potentially disastrous. And of course there were the early terrorist attacks, crude and disorganized, but extracting a horrible toll nonetheless.

The survivors were tiny and swift, and wiser, and they were able to streamline the Transmutation, making it more accurate and affordable, and to a degree, routine.

"I was forty-three when I left the other world." Julian told his lover

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of the moment. He always used those words, framing them with defiance and a hint of bittersweet longing. "It was three days and two hours before the President signed the McGrugger Bill."

That's when Transmutation became illegal in the United States.

His lover did her math, then with a genuine awe said, "That was five hundred and twelve days ago."

A day was worth years inside a Nest.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Why did you do it? Were you bored? Or sick?"

"Don't you know why?" he inquired.

"No," she squeaked.

Julian was famous, but sometimes his life wasn't. And why should the youngsters know his biography by heart?

"I don't want to force you," the woman told him. "If you'd rather not talk about it, I'll understand."

Julian didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he climbed from his bed and crossed the cabin. His kitchenette had created a drink — hydrocarbons mixed with nanochines that were nutritious, appetizing, and pleasantly narcotic. Food and drink were not necessities, but habits, and they were enjoying a renewed popularity. Like any credible Methuselah, Julian was often the model on how best to do archaic oddities.

The woman lay on top of the bed. Her current body was a hologram laid over her mechanical core. It was a traditional body, probably worn for his pleasure; no wings or fins or even more bizarre adornments. As it happened, she had selected a build and complexion not very different from Julian's first wife. A coincidence? Or had she actually done research, and she already knew the answers to her prying questions?

"Sip," he advised, handing her the drink.

Their hands brushed against one another, shaped light touching its equivalent. What each felt was a synthetically generated sensation, basically human, intended to feel like warm, water-filled skin.

The girl obeyed, smiling as she sipped, an audible slurp amusing both of them.

"Here," she said, handing back the glass. "Your turn."

Julian glanced at the far wall. A universal window gave them a live

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view of the Quik Shop, the image supplied by one of the multitude of cameras hidden on the Buick's exterior. What held his interest was the old muscle car, a Python with smoked glass windows. When he first saw that car, three heads were visible. Now two of the heads had gradually dropped out of sight, with the remaining man still sitting in back, big eyes opened wide, making no attempt to hide his interest in the Buick's driver.

No one knew who the fat man was, or what he knew, much less what his intentions might be. His presence had been a complete surprise, and what he had done with those militia members, pulling them back as he did as well as the rest of it, had left the refugees more startled than grateful, and more scared than any time since leaving the Nest.

Julian had gone to that store with the intent of suffering a clumsy, even violent interrogation. A militia encounter was meant to give them authenticity. And more importantly, to give Julian experience — precious and sobering firsthand experience with the much-changed world around them.

A world that he hadn't visited for more than a millennium, Nest-time.

Since he last looked, nothing of substance had changed at that ugly store. And probably nothing would change for a long while. One lesson that no refugee needed, much less craved, was that when dealing with that other realm, nothing helped as much as patience.

Taking a long, slow sip of their drink, he looked back at the woman — twenty days old; a virtual child — and without a shred of patience, she said, "You were sick, weren't you? I heard someone saying that's why you agreed to be Transmutated...five hundred and twelve days ago..."

"No." He offered a shy smile. "And it wasn't because I wanted to live this way, either. To be honest, I've always been conservative. In that world, and this one, too."

She nodded amiably, waiting.

"It was my daughter," he explained. "She was sick. An incurable leukemia." Again he offered the shy smile, adding, "She was nine years old, and terrified. I could save her life by agreeing to her Transmutation, but I couldn't just abandon her to life in the Nest...making her into an orphan, basically..."

"I see," his lover whispered.

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Then after a respectful silence, she asked, "Where's your daughter now?"

"Dead."

"Of course..." Not many people were lucky enough to live five hundred days in a Nest; despite shields, a single heavy nucleus could still find you, ravaging your mind, extinguishing your very delicate soul. "How long ago...did it happen...?"

"This morning," he replied. "In the attack."

"Oh...I'm very sorry..."

With the illusion of shoulders, Julian shrugged. Then with his bittersweet voice, he admitted, "It already seems long ago."

WINEMASTER HEADED NORTH into Iowa, then did the unexpected, making the sudden turn east when he reached the new Tollway.

Blaine shadowed him. He liked to keep two minutes between the Buick and his little Tokamak, using the FBI's recon network to help monitor the situation. But the network had been compromised in the past, probably more often than anyone knew, which meant that he had to occasionally pay the Tollway a little extra to boost his speed, the gap closing to less than fifteen seconds. Then with the optics in his windshield, he would get a good look at what might or might not be Julian Winemaster — a stiffly erect gentleman who kept one hand on the wheel, even when the AI-managed road was controlling every vehicle's speed and direction, and doing a better job of driving than any human could do.

Iowa was half-beautiful, half-bleak. Some fields looked tended, genetically tailored crops planted in fractal patterns and the occasional robot working carefully, pulling weeds and killing pests as it spider-walked back and forth. But there were long stretches where the farms had been abandoned, wild grasses and the spawn of last year's crops coming up in ragged green masses. Entire neighborhoods had pulled up and gone elsewhere. How many farmers had accepted the Transmutation, in other countries or illegally? Probably only a fraction of them, Blaine knew. Habit-bound and suspicious by nature, they'd never agree to the dismantlement of their bodies, the transplantation of their crusty souls. No,

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what happened was that farms were simply falling out of production, particularly where the soil was marginal. Yields were still improving in a world where the old-style population was tumbling. If patterns held, most of the arable land would soon return to prairie and forest. And eventually, the entire human species wouldn't fill so much as one of these abandoned farms...leaving the old world entirely empty...if those patterns were allowed to hold, naturally...

Unlike Winemaster, Blaine kept neither hand on the wheel, trusting the AIs to look after him. He spent most of his time watching the news networks, keeping tabs on moods more than facts. What had happened in Kansas was still the big story. By noon, more than twenty groups and individuals had claimed responsibility for the attack. Officially, the Emergency Federal Council deplored any senseless violence — a cliché which implied that sensible violence was an entirely different question. When asked about the government's response, the President's press secretary looked at the world with a stony face, saying, "We're investigating the regrettable incident. But the fact remains, it happened outside our borders. We are observers here. The Shawnee Nest was responsible for its own security, just as every other Nest is responsible..."

Questions came in a flurry. The press secretary pointed to a small, severe-looking man in the front row — a reporter for the Christian Promise organization. "Are we taking any precautions against counterattacks?" the reporter inquired. Then, not waiting for an answer, he added, "There have been reports of activity in the other Nests, inside the United States and elsewhere."

A tense smile was the first reply.

Then the stony face told everyone, "The President and the Council have taken every appropriate precaution. As for any activity in any Nest, I can only say: We have everything perfectly well in hand."

"Is anything left of the Shawnee Nest?" asked a second reporter.

"No." The press secretary was neither sad nor pleased. "Initial evidence is that the entire facility has been sterilized."

A tenacious gray-haired woman — the perpetual symbol of the Canadian Newsweb — called out, "Mr. Secretary...Lennie — !"

"Yes, Cora..."

"How many were killed?"

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"I wouldn't know how to answer that question, Cora..."

"Your government estimates an excess of one hundred million. If the entire Nest was sterilized, as you say, then we're talking about more than two-thirds of the current U.S. population."

"Legally," he replied, "we are talking about machines."

"Some of those machines were once your citizens," she mentioned.

The reporter from Christian Promise was standing nearby. He grimaced, then muttered bits of relevant Scripture.

"I don't think this is the time or place to debate what life is or isn't," said the press secretary, juggling things badly.

Cora persisted. "Are you aware of the Canadian position on this tragedy?"

"Like us, they're saddened."

"They've offered sanctuary to any survivors of the blast — "

"Except there are none," he replied, his face pink as granite.

"But if there were? Would you let them move to another Nest in the United States, or perhaps to Canada...?"

There was a pause, brief and electric.

Then with a flat cool voice, the press secretary reported, "The McGrugger Bill is very specific. Nests may exist only in sealed containment facilities, monitored at all times. And should any of the microchines escape, they will be treated as what they are...grave hazards to normal life...and this government will not let them roam at will...!"

Set inside an abandoned salt mine near Kansas City, the Shawnee Nest had been one of the most secure facilities of its kind ever built. Its power came from clean geothermal sources. Lead plates and intricate defense systems stood against natural hazards as well as more human threats. Thousands of government-loyal AIs, positioned in the surrounding salt, did nothing but watch its borders, making certain that none of the microchines could escape. That was why the thought that local terrorists could launch any attack was so ludicrous. To have that attack succeed was simply preposterous. Whoever was responsible for the bomb, it was done with the abeyance of the highest authorities. No sensible soul doubted it. That dirty little nuke had Federal fingerprints on it, and the attack was

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planned carefully, and its goals were instantly apparent to people large and small.

Julian had no doubts. He had enemies, vast and malicious, and nobody was more entitled to his paranoias.

Just short of Illinois, the Buick made a long-scheduled stop.

Julian took possession of his clone at the last moment. The process was supposed to be routine — a simple matter of slowing his thoughts a thousandfold, then integrating them with his body — but there were always phantom pains and a sick falling sensation. Becoming a bloated watery bag wasn't the strangest part of it. After all, the Nest was designed to mimic this kind of existence. What gnawed at Julian was the gargantuan sense of Time: A half an hour in this realm was nearly a month in his realm. No matter how brief the stop, Julian would feel a little lost when he returned, a step behind the others, and far more emotionally drained than he would ever admit.

By the time the car had stopped, Julian was in full control of the body. His body, he reminded himself. Climbing out into the heat and brilliant sunshine, he felt a purposeful stiffness in his back and the familiar ache running down his right leg. In his past life, he was plagued by sciatica pains. It was one of many ailments that he hadn't missed after his Transmutation. And it was just another detail that someone had thought to include, forcing him to wince and stretch, showing the watching world that he was their flavor of mortal.

Suddenly another old pain began to call to Julian.

Hunger.

His duty was to fill the tank, then do everything expected of a road-weary driver. The rest area was surrounded by the Tollway, gas pumps surrounding a fast food/playground complex. Built to handle tens of thousands of people daily, the facility had suffered with the civil chaos, the militias and the plummeting populations. A few dozen travelers went about their business in near-solitude, and presumably a team of state or Federal agents were lurking nearby, using sensors to scan for those who weren't what they seemed to be.

Without incident, Julian managed the first part of his mission. Then he drove a tiny distance and parked, repeating his stiff climb out of the car, entering the restaurant and steering straight for the restroom.

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He was alone, thankfully.

The diagnostic urinal gently warned him to drink more fluids, then wished him a lovely day.

Taking the advice to heart, Julian ordered a bucket-sized ice tea along with a cultured guinea hen sandwich.

"For here or to go?" asked the automated clerk.

"I'm staying," he replied, believing it would look best.

"Thank you, sir. Have a lovely day."

Julian sat in the back booth, eating slowly and mannerly, scanning the pages of someone's forgotten e-paper. He made a point of lingering over the trite and trivial, concentrating on the comics with their humanized cats and cartoonish people, everyone playing out the same jokes that must have amused him in the very remote past.

"How's it going?"

The voice was slow and wet. Julian blanked the page, looking over his shoulder, betraying nothing as his eyes settled on the familiar wide face. "Fine," he replied, his own voice polite but distant. "Thank you."

"Is it me? Or is it just too damned hot to live out there...?"

"It is hot," Julian conceded.

"Particularly for the likes of me." The man settled onto a plastic chair bolted into the floor with clown heads. His lunch buried his little table: Three sandwiches, a greasy sack of fried cucumbers, and a tall chocolate shake. "It's murder when you're fat. Let me tell you...I've got to be careful in this weather. I don't move fast. I talk softly. I even have to ration my thinking. I mean it! Too many thoughts, and I break out in a killing sweat!"

Julian had prepared for this moment. Yet nothing was happening quite like he or anyone else had expected.

Saying nothing, Julian took a shy bite out of his sandwich.

"You look like a smart guy," said his companion. "Tell me. If the world's getting emptier, like everyone says, why am I still getting poorer?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's the way it feels, at least." The man was truly fat, his face smooth and youthful, every feature pressed outward by the remnants of countless lunches. "You'd think that with all the smart ones leaving for

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the Nests...you'd think guys like you and me would do pretty well for ourselves. You know?"

Using every resource, the refugees had found three identities for this man: He was a salesman from St. Joseph, Missouri. Or he was a Federal agent working for the Department of Technology, in its Enforcement division, and his salesman identity was a cover. Or he was a charter member of the Christian Promise organization, using that group's political connections to accomplish its murderous goals.

What does he want? Julian asked himself.

He took another shy bite, wiped his mouth with a napkin, then offered his own question. "Why do you say that...that it's the smart people who are leaving...?"

"That's what studies show," said a booming, unashamed voice. "Half our people are gone, but we've lost ninety percent of our scientists. Eighty percent of our doctors. And almost every last member of Mensa...which between you and me is a good thing, I think...!"

Another bite, and wipe. Then with a genuine firmness, Julian told him, "I don't think we should be talking. We don't know each other."

A huge cackling laugh ended with an abrupt statement:

"That's why we should talk. We're strangers, so where's the harm?"

Suddenly the guinea hen sandwich appeared huge and inedible. Julian set it down and took a gulp of tea.

His companion watched him, apparently captivated.

Julian swallowed, then asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"What I'm good at." He unwrapped a hamburger, then took an enormous bite, leaving a crescent-shaped sandwich and a fine glistening stain around his smile. "Put it this way, Mr. Winemaster. I'm like anyone. I do what I hope is best."

"How do you — ?"

"Your name? The same way I know your address, and your social registration number, and your bank balance, too." He took a moment to consume half of the remaining crescent, then while chewing, he choked out the words, "Blaine. My name is. If you'd like to use it."

Each of the man's possible identities used Blaine, either as a first or last name.

Julian wrapped the rest of his sandwich in its insulated paper,

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watching his hands begin to tremble. He had a pianist's hands in his first life but absolutely no talent for music. When he went through the Transmutation, he'd asked for a better ear and more coordination — both of which were given to him with minimal fuss. Yet he'd never learned how to play, not even after five hundred days. It suddenly seemed like a tragic waste of talent, and with a secret voice, he promised himself to take lessons, starting immediately.

"So, Mr. Winemaster...where are you heading...?"

Julian managed another sip of tea, grimacing at the bitter taste.

"Someplace east, judging by what I can see..."

"Yes," he allowed. Then he added, "Which is none of your business."

Blaine gave a hearty laugh, shoving the last of the burger deep into his gaping mouth. Then he spoke, showing off the masticated meat and tomatoes, telling his new friend, "Maybe you'll need help somewhere up ahead. Just maybe. And if that happens, I want you to think of me."

"You'll help me, will you?"

The food-stuffed grin was practically radiant. "Think of me," he repeated happily. "That's all I'm saying."

FOR A LONG WHILE, the refugees spoke and dreamed of nothing but the mysterious Blaine. Which side did he represent? Should they trust him? Or move against him? And if they tried to stop the man, which way was best? Sabotage his car? Drug his next meal? Or would they have to do something genuinely horrible?

But there were no answers, much less a consensus. Blaine continued shadowing them, at a respectful distance; nothing substantial was learned about him; and despite the enormous stakes, the refugees found themselves gradually drifting back into the moment-by-moment business of ordinary life.

Couples and amalgamations of couples were beginning to make babies.

There was a logic: Refugees were dying every few minutes, usually from radiation exposure. The losses weren't critical, but when they reached their new home — the deep cold rock of the Canadian Shield — they would need numbers, a real demographic momentum. And logic

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always dances with emotion. Babies served as a tonic to the adults. They didn't demand too many resources, and they forced their parents to focus on more managable problems, like building tiny bodies and caring for needy souls.

Even Julian was swayed by fashion.

With one of his oldest women friends, he found himself hovering over a crystalline womb, watching nanochines sculpt their son out of single atoms and tiny electric breaths.

It was only Julian's second child.

As long as his daughter had been alive, he hadn't seen the point in having another. The truth was that it had always disgusted him to know that the children in the Nest were manufactured — there was no other word for it — and he didn't relish being reminded that he was nothing, more or less, than a fancy machine among millions of similar machines.

Julian often dreamed of his dead daughter. Usually she was on board their strange ark, and he would find a note from her, and a cabin number, and he would wake up smiling, feeling certain that he would find her today. Then he would suddenly remember the bomb, and he would start to cry, suffering through the wrenching, damning loss all over again.

Which was ironic, in a fashion.

During the last nineteen months, father and daughter had gradually and inexorably drifted apart. She was very much a child when they came to the Nest, as flexible as her father wasn't, and how many times had Julian lain awake in bed, wondering why he had ever bothered being Transmutated. His daughter didn't need him, plainly. He could have remained behind. Which always led to the same questions: When he was a normal human being, was he genuinely happy? Or was his daughter's illness simply an excuse...a spicy bit of good fortune that offered an escape route...?

When the Nest was destroyed, Julian survived only through more good fortune. He was as far from the epicenter as possible, shielded by the Nest's interior walls and emergency barricades. Yet even then, most of the people near him were killed, an invisible neutron rain scrambling their minds. That same rain had knocked him unconscious just before the firestorm arrived, and if an autodoc hadn't found his limp body, then dragged him into a shelter, he would have been cremated. And of course

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if the Nest hadn't devised its elaborate escape plan, stockpiling the Buick and cloning equipment outside the Nest, Julian would have had no choice but to remain in the rubble, fighting to survive the next moment, and the next.

But those coincidences happened, making his present life feel like the culmination of some glorious Fate.

The secret truth was that Julian relished his new importance, and he enjoyed the pressures that came with each bathroom break and every stop for gas. If he died now, between missions, others could take his place, leading Winemaster's cloned body through the needed motions...but they wouldn't do as well, Julian could tell himself...a secret part of him wishing that this bizarre, slow-motion chase would never come to an end...

The Buick stayed on the Tollway through northern Illinois, slipping beneath Chicago before skipping across a sliver of Indiana. Julian was integrated with his larger self several times, going through the motions of the stiff, tired, and hungry traveler. Blaine always arrived several minutes later, never approaching his quarry, always finding gas at different pumps, standing outside the rest rooms, waiting to show Julian a big smile but never uttering so much as a word in passing.

A little after midnight, the Buick's driver took his hand off the wheel, lay back and fell asleep. Trusting the Tollway's driving was out of character, but with Blaine trailing them and the border approaching, no one was eager to waste time in a motel bed.

At two in the morning, Julian was also asleep, dipping in and out of dreams. Suddenly a hand took him by the shoulder, shaking him, and several voices, urgent and close, said, "We need you, Julian. Now."

In his dreams, a thousand admiring faces were saying, "We need you."

Julian awoke.

His cabin was full of people. His mate had been ushered away, but his unborn child, nearly complete now, floated in his bubble of blackened crystal, oblivious to the nervous air and the tight, crisp voices.

"What's wrong?" Julian asked.

"Everything," they assured.

His universal window showed a live feed from a security camera on the North Dakota-Manitoba border. Department of Technology investi-

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gators, backed up by a platoon of heavily armed Marines, were dismantling a Toyota Sunrise. Even at those syrupy speeds, the lasers moved quickly, leaving the vehicle in tiny pieces that were photographed, analyzed, then fed into a state-of-the-art decontamination unit.

"What is this?" Julian sputtered.

But he already knew the answer.

"There was a second group of refugees," said the President, kneeling beside his bed. She was wearing an oversized face — a common fashion, of late — and with a very calm, very grim voice, she admitted, "We weren't the only survivors."

They had kept it a secret, at least from Julian. Which was perfectly reasonable, he reminded himself. What if he had been captured? Under torture, he could have doomed that second lifeboat, and everyone inside it...

"Is my daughter there?" he blurted, uncertain what to hope for.

The President shook her head. "No, Julian."

Yet if two arks existed, couldn't there be a third? And wouldn't the President keep its existence secret from him, too?

"We've been monitoring events," she continued. "It's tragic, what's happening to our friends...but we'll be able to adjust our methods...for when we cross the border..."

He looked at the other oversized faces. "But why do you need me? We won't reach Detroit for hours."

The President looked over her shoulder. "Play the recording."

Suddenly Julian was looking back in time. He saw the Sunrise pull up to the border post, waiting in line to be searched. A pickup truck with Wyoming plates pulled up behind it, and out stepped a preposterously tall man brandishing a badge and a handgun. With an eerie sense of purpose, he strode up to the little car, took aim and fired his full clip through the driver's window. The body behind the wheel jerked and kicked as it was ripped apart. Then the murderer reached in and pulled the corpse out through the shattered glass, shouting at the Tech investigators:

"I've got them! Here! For Christ's sake, help me!"

The image dissolved, the window returning to the real-time, real-speed scene.

To himself, Julian whispered, "No, it can't be..."

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The President took his hands in hers, their warmth a comfortable fiction. "We would have shown you this as it was happening, but we weren't sure what it meant."

"But you're sure now?"

"That man followed our people. All the way from Nebraska." She shook her head, admitting, "We don't know everything, no. For security reasons, we rarely spoke with those other survivors — "

"What are we going to do?" Julian growled.

"The only reasonable thing left for us." She smiled in a sad fashion, then warned him, "We're pulling off the Tollway now. You still have a little while to get ready..."

He closed his eyes, saying nothing.

"Not as long as you'd like, I'm sure...but with this sort of thing, maybe it's best to hurry..."

THERE WERE NO GAS PUMPS or restaurants in the rest area. A small divided parking lot was surrounded by trees and fake log cabin lavatories that in turn were sandwiched between broad lanes of moonlit pavement. The parking lot was empty. The only traffic was a single truck in the westbound freighter lane, half a dozen trailers towed along in its wake. Julian watched the truck pass, then walked into the darkest shadows, and kneeled.

The security cameras were being fed false images — images that were hopefully more convincing than the ludicrous log cabins. Yet even when he knew that he was safe, Julian felt exposed. Vulnerable. The feeling worsened by the moment, becoming a black dread, and by the time the Tokamak pulled to stop, his newborn heart was racing, and his quick damp breath tasted foul.

Blaine parked two slots away from the sleeping Buick. He didn't bother looking through the windows. Instead, guided by intuition or hidden sensor, he strolled toward the men's room, hesitated, then took a few half-steps toward Julian, passing into a patch of moonlight.

Using both hands, Julian lifted his weapon, letting it aim itself at the smooth broad forehead.

"Well," said Blaine, "I see you're thinking about me."

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"What do you want?" Julian whispered. Then with a certain clumsiness, he added, "With me."

The man remained silent for a moment, a smile building.

"Who am I?" he asked suddenly. "Ideas? Do you have any?"

Julian gulped a breath, then said, "You work for the government." His voice was testy, pained. "And I don't know why you're following me!"

Blaine didn't offer answers. Instead he warned his audience, "The border is a lot harder to pierce than you think."

"Is it?"

"Humans aren't fools," Blaine reminded him. "After all, they designed the technologies used by the Nests, and they've had just as long as you to improve on old tricks."

"People in the world are getting dumber," said Julian. "You told me that."

"And those same people are very scared, very focused," his opponent countered. "Their borders are a priority to them. You are their top priority. And even if your thought processes are accelerated a thousandfold, they've got AIs who can blister you in any race of intellect. At least for the time being, they can."

Shoot him, an inner voice urged.

Yet Julian did nothing, waiting silently, hoping to be saved from this onerous chore.

"You can't cross into Canada without me," Blaine told him.

"I know what happened..." Julian felt the gun's barrel adjusting itself as his hands grew tired and dropped slightly. "Up in North Dakota...we know all about it..."

It was Blaine's turn to keep silent.

Again, Julian asked, "Who are you? Just tell me that much."

"You haven't guessed it, have you?" The round face seemed genuinely disappointed. "Not even in your wildest dreams..."

"And why help us?" Julian muttered, saying too much.

"Because in the long run, helping you helps me."

"How?"

Silence.

"We don't have any wealth," Julian roared. "Our homes were destroyed. By you, for all I know — "

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The man laughed loudly, smirking as he began to turn away. "You've got some time left. Think about the possibilities, and we'll talk again."

Julian tugged on the trigger. Just once.

Eighteen shells pierced the back of Blaine's head, then worked down the wide back, devastating every organ even as the lifeless body crumpled. Even a huge man falls fast, Julian observed. Then he rose, walking on weak legs, and with his own aim, he emptied the rest of his clip into the gore.

It was easy, pumping in those final shots.

What's more, shooting the dead carried an odd, unexpected satisfaction — which was probably the same satisfaction that the terrorists had felt when their tiny bomb destroyed a hundred million soulless machines.

With every refugee watching, Julian cut open the womb with laser shears.

Julian Jr. was born a few seconds after two-thirty A.M., and the audience, desperate for a good celebration, nearly buried the baby with gifts and sweet words. Yet nobody could spoil him like his father could. For the next few hours, Julian pestered his first son with love and praise, working with a manic energy to fill every need, every whim. And his quest to be a perfect father only grew worse. The sun was beginning to show itself; Canada was waiting over the horizon; but Julian was oblivious, hunched over the toddler with sparkling toys in both hands, his never-pretty voice trying to sing a child's song, nothing half as important in this world as making his son giggle and smile...!

They weren't getting past the border. Their enemies were too clever, and too paranoid. Julian could smell the inevitable, but because he didn't know what else to do, he went through the motions of smiling for the President and the public, saying the usual brave words whenever it was demanded of him.

Sometimes Julian took his boy for long rides around the lifeboat.

During one journey, a woman knelt and happily teased the baby, then looked up at the famous man, mentioning in an off-handed way, "We'll get to our new home just in time for him to grow into it."

Those words gnawed at Julian, although he was helpless to explain why.

By then the sun had risen, its brilliant light sweeping across a sleepy

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border town. Instead of crossing at Detroit, the refugees had abandoned the Tollway, taking an old highway north to Port Huron. It would be easier here, was the logic. The prayer. Gazing out the universal window, Julian looked at the boarded up homes and abandoned businesses, cars parked and forgotten, weeds growing in every yard, every crack. The border cities had lost most of their people in the last year-plus, he recalled. It was too easy and too accepted, this business of crossing into a land where it was still legal to be remade. In another year, most of the United States would look this way, unless the government took more drastic measures such as closing its borders, or worse, invading its wrong-minded neighbors...!

Julian felt a deep chill, shuddering.

That's when he suddenly understood. Everything. And in the next few seconds, after much thought, he knew precisely what he had to do.

Assuming there was still time...

A dozen cars were lined up in front of the customs station. The Buick had slipped in behind a couple on a motorcycle. Only one examination station was open, and every traveler was required to first declare his intentions, then permanently give up his citizenship. It would be a long wait. The driver turned the engine off, watching the Marines and Tech officials at work, everything about them relentlessly professional. Three more cars pulled up behind him, including a Tokamak, and he happened to glance at the rearview screen when Blaine climbed out, walking with a genuine bounce, approaching on the right and rapping on the passenger window with one fat knuckle, then stooping down and smiling through the glass, proving that he had made a remarkable recovery since being murdered.

Julian unlocked the door for him.

With a heavy grunt, Blaine pulled himself in and shut the door, then gave his companion a quick wink.

Julian wasn't surprised. If anything, he was relieved, telling his companion, "I think I know what you are."

"Good," said Blaine. "And what do your friends think?"

"I don't know. I never told them." Julian took the steering wheel in both hands. "I was afraid that if I did, they wouldn't believe me. They'd think I was crazy, and dangerous. And they wouldn't let me come here."

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The line was moving, jerking forward one car-length. Julian started the Buick and crept forward, then turned it off again.

With a genuine fondness, Blaine touched him on a shoulder, commenting, "Your friends might pull you back into their world now. Have you thought of that?"

"Sure," said Julian. "But for the next few seconds, they'll be too confused to make any big decisions."

Lake Huron lay on Blaine's left, vast and deeply blue, and he studied the picket boats that dotted the water, bristling with lasers that did nothing but flip back and forth, back and forth, incinerating any flying object that appeared even remotely suspicious.

"So tell me," he asked his companion, "why do you think I'm here?"

Julian turned his body, the cultured leather squeaking beneath him. Gesturing at Port Huron, he said, "If these trends continue, everything's going to look that way soon. Empty. Abandoned. Humans will have almost vanished from this world, which means that perhaps someone else could move in without too much trouble. They'll find houses, and good roads to drive on, and a communication system already in place. Ready-made lives, and practically free for the taking."

"What sort of someone?"

"That's what suddenly occurred to me." Julian took a deep breath, then said, "Humans are making themselves smaller, and faster. But what if something other than humans is doing the same thing? What if there's something in the universe that's huge, and very slow by human standards, but intelligent nonetheless. Maybe it lives in cold places between the stars. Maybe somewhere else. The point is, this other species is undergoing a similar kind of transformation. It's making itself a thousand times smaller, and a thousand times quicker, which puts it roughly equal to this." The frail face was smiling, and he lifted his hands from the wheel. "Flesh and blood, and bone...these are the high-technology materials that build your version of microchines!"

Blaine winked again, saying, "You're probably right. If you'd explained it that way, your little friends would have labeled you insane."

"But am I right?"

There was no reason to answer him directly. "What about me, Mr. Winemaster? How do you look at me?"

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"You want to help us." Julian suddenly winced, then shuddered. But he didn't mention it, saying, "I assume that you have different abilities than we do...that you can get us past their sensors — "

"Is something wrong, Mr. Winemaster?"

"My friends...they're trying to take control of this body..."

"Can you deal with them?"

"For another minute. I changed all the control codes." Again, he winced. "You don't want the government aware of you, right? And you're trying to help steer us and them away from war...during this period of transition — "

"The way we see it," Blaine confessed, "the chance of a worldwide cataclysm is just about one in three, and worsening."

Julian nodded, his face contorting in agony. "If I accept your help...?"

"Then I'll need yours." He set a broad hand on Julian's neck. "You've done a remarkable job hiding yourselves. You and your friends are in this car, but my tools can't tell me where. Not without more time, at least. And that's time we don't have..."

Julian stiffened, his clothes instantly soaked with perspiration.

Quietly, quickly, he said, "But if you're really a government agent...here to fool me into telling you...everything...?"

"I'm not," Blaine promised.

A second examination station had just opened; people were maneuvering for position, leaving a gap in front of them.

Julian started his car, pulling forward. "If I do tell you...where we are...they'll think that I've betrayed them...!"

The Buick's anticollision system engaged, bringing them to an abrupt stop.

"Listen," said Blaine. "You've got only a few seconds to decide — "

"I know..."

"Where, Mr. Winemaster? Where?"

"Julian," he said, wincing again.

"Julian."

A glint of pride showed in the eyes. "We're not...in the car..." Then the eyes grew enormous, and Julian tried shouting the answer...his mind suddenly losing its grip on that tiny, lovely mouth...

Blaine swung with his right fist, shattering a cheekbone with his first blow, killing the body before the last blow.

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By the time the Marines had surrounded the car, its interior was painted with gore, and in horror, the soldiers watched as the madman — he couldn't be anything but insane — calmly rolled down his window and smiled with a blood-rimmed mouth, telling his audience, "I had to kill him. He's Satan."

A hardened lieutenant looked in at the victim, torn open like a sack, and she shivered, moaning aloud for the poor man.

With perfect calm, Blaine declared, "I had to eat his heart. That's how you kill Satan. Don't you know?"

For disobeying orders, the President declared Julian a traitor, and she oversaw his trial and conviction. The entire process took less than a minute. His quarters were remodeled to serve as his prison cell. In the next ten minutes, three separate attempts were made on his life. Not everyone agreed with the court's sentence, it seemed. Which was understandable. Contact with the outside world had been lost the instant Winemaster died. The refugees and their lifeboat were lost in every kind of darkness. At any moment, the Tech specialists would throw them into a decontamination unit, and they would evaporate without warning. And all because they'd entrusted themselves to an old DNA-born human who never really wanted to be Transmutated in the first place, according to at least one of his former lovers...

Ostensibly for security reasons, Julian wasn't permitted visitors.

Not even his young son could be brought to him, nor was he allowed to see so much as a picture of the boy.

Julian spent his waking moments pacing back and forth in the dim light, trying to exhaust himself, then falling into a hard sleep, too tired to dream at all, if he was lucky...

Before the first hour was finished, he had lost all track of time.

After nine full days of relentless isolation, the universe had shriveled until nothing existed but his cell, and him, his memories indistinguishable from fantasies.

On the tenth day, the cell door opened.

A young man stepped in, and with a stranger's voice, he said, "Father."

"Who are you?" asked Julian.

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His son didn't answer, giving him the urgent news instead. "Mr. Blaine finally made contact with us, explaining what he is and what's happened so far, and what will happen...!"

Confusion wrestled with a fledging sense of relief.

"He's from between the stars, just like you guessed, Father. And he's been found insane for your murder. Though of course you're not dead. But the government believes there was a Julian Winemaster, and it's holding Blaine in a Detroit hospital, and he's holding us. His metabolism is augmenting our energy production, and when nobody's watching, he'll connect us with the outside world."

Julian couldn't imagine such a wild story: It had to be true!

"When the world is safe, in a year or two, he'll act cured or he'll escape — whatever is necessary — and he'll carry us wherever we want to go."

The old man sat on his bed, suddenly exhausted.

"Where would you like to go, Father?"

"Out that door," Julian managed. Then a wondrous thought took him by surprise, and he grinned, saying, "No, I want to be like Blaine was. I want to live between the stars, to be huge and cold, and slow...

"Not today, maybe...

"But soon...definitely soon...!"

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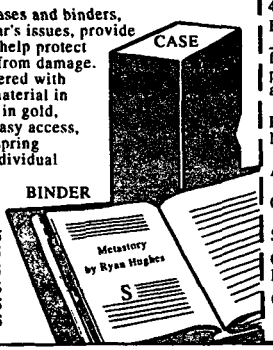

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

MIRRORS have a reputation for trickiness. Magicians use them to fool your eyes and make rabbits come out of hats. Break a mirror, and you get seven years bad luck. In science fiction and fantasy literature, mirrors have often played an important role. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice travels through a mirror to a world where a talking egg advises her on the meaning of words. In the fairy tale of "Snow White," a magic mirror tells the wicked queen who is the fairest, thus getting poor Snow White in no end of trouble. In Greek myth, Perseus uses a polished shield as a mirror so that he can lop off the head of the Medusa, a Gorgon with snakes for hair and other unattractive attributes. (Looking directly at the Medusa would have turned Perseus to stone.)

Now there are some interesting cultural issues here — like why did Perseus have to go hounding this poor Gorgon anyway, since she lived on a remote island and didn't seem to be bothering anyone. And why was the wicked queen so obsessed with her beauty, rather than her wit, her charm, her bravery, or any of a number of other attributes? Pat may take up these issues in future stories, but they aren't the topic of this column.

Here, we are dealing with the scientific side of mirrors. There's no need to venture into fantasy or gender politics to recognize the trickiness of mirrors. All you need is a mirror or two and the time to make a few observations.

A TRICKY QUESTION

But before we get to that, here's a question to ponder. Suppose you're in a *Twilight Zone* story in which the mirror image of your best friend steps out of the mirror, a flesh-and-blood doppelgänger that tries to take

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over your friend's life. The doppelgänger is your friend's mirror image — it looks just like her. Or does it? How can you tell the original friend from the mirror-image doppelgänger?

Take a minute and think about it. We'll tell you the answer in the next paragraph. The answer is simple — you probably knew it immediately — but as one learns around the Exploratorium, simple answers can be as tricky as mirrors.

So how do you tell the doppelgänger from the original? Well, let's say your friend was right-handed. You toss a pencil to one version of your friend and then to the other. One catches the pencil in her right hand; the other uses her left hand. Ah, ha! If your friend was right-handed, the mirror-image doppelgänger will be left-handed. You've identified the doppelgänger; it's the sinister lefty.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

You can confirm that the doppelgänger of a right-handed person will be left-handed by taking a look in a mirror. Reach up and touch your right ear with your right hand. Your mirror image doppelgänger — that is, your mirror image — will reach up and touch its left ear with its left hand. So you know that mirrors reverse right and left.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're saying. This is old news. Tell me something I didn't know.

Hold on there! Not so fast! We told you that mirrors are tricky. Let's take another look at what mirrors really reverse.

First, following in the footsteps of the wicked queen in Snow White, find a mirror on a wall. For this experiment, it is important that the mirror is on the wall rather than lying flat on a table or on the ceiling over your bed (but let's not get into that).

Hold this arrow so that it points to the ceiling. Look at the reflection of the arrow and yourself in the mirror. The reflected arrow also points toward the ceiling. So now you know that up and down remain the same for the arrow and the mirror image in the mirror on the wall.

Next, point the arrow to one side. We'll need to identify the direction in which the arrow is pointing, so move something to one side of you and the mirror. When Paul was doing this experiment in his

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office, he moved a trashcan to one side of the mirror, so let's just say you do the same. Point the arrow to the trashcan side. What does the mirror arrow do? It also points to the trashcan side—the mirror doesn't reverse the direction of the arrow.

Now isn't that odd? Your friend's doppelgänger was left-handed because mirrors reverse right and left. So why doesn't the mirror reverse the direction of the arrow? Here's where the trickiness of mirrors becomes entangled with the trickiness of semantics. When discussing mirrors we have to struggle with the meaning of "right" and "left."

ON THE OTHER HAND

To explore the meanings of right and left, you'll need a pair of gloves. (We used the rubber dishwashing gloves from under Pat's sink.)

Pick up the right-handed glove and hold it with fingers up and palm toward the mirror. Take a look at its image in the mirror. Could you put your actual right hand into a glove that looked like the one you see reflected in the mirror? Place your right hand against the mirror as you compare it to the glove. Be sure to look at your hand and compare it to the reflection of the glove—if you look at the mirror image of your hand, you'll just confuse yourself even more. Your right hand won't fit in the mirror image of the right-handed glove.

Somehow the mirror doesn't reverse up-down, or trashcanward-antitrashcanward, but it does change the reflection of a right-handed glove into a left-handed one. How can this be?

To find out what the mirror really reverses, hold up the arrow on page 130 again. Look in the mirror and point the arrow away from you, toward the mirror. Look at what happens. The image of the arrow in the mirror points toward you, out of the mirror.

Ah, ha! The mirror reverses in and out. This in-out reversal is what changes a right-handed glove into a left-handed one.

WHAT'S RIGHT, ANYWAY?

So how do you tell right from left? You could start with a hand print, like the ones you see in Anasazi pictographs in the American southwest or on the walls of elementary school classrooms at Thanksgiving (colored in to make turkeys). Make a tracing of your own right hand. Put a piece of paper

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on a table. Place your right hand on the paper, palm down, with the thumb stuck out to the side at right angles to your fingers. Use a pencil to trace your hand. (You can, if you like, now decorate it to look like a turkey. Or not.)

Try to fit your left hand into the drawing. Notice that when you place your left hand on the drawing, palm down, the thumb is on the wrong side. Show the drawing to someone who has not seen you do the tracing. Ask them if it is a right hand or a left hand. They will probably say it is the tracing of a right hand since they guessed that you traced your hand with the palm toward the paper like any sensible person would.

Ah, but that's not the only answer. Get another piece of paper. This time, put your left hand on the paper with the palm up, and trace your hand. Compare this tracing to the tracing of your right hand with the palm down. What do you know? A tracing of a left hand with the palm up looks just like a right hand with the palm down. If you showed someone the tracing of your left hand, chances are they'd guess it was a tracing of your right hand. Whether the viewer sees the trace of a right hand or a left hand depends on which way they think the palm of the hand is facing. If the palm of the traced hand points into the paper it is a right hand; if it points out, it is a left hand. From the tracing you can't tell which way the hand was facing.

So this simple tracing leads us to appreciate one important facet behind the concept of right and left. To make a right hand or a left hand you need to specify all three dimensions: you need to know which way the fingers point, which way the thumb points, and which way the palm points. Change the direction of any one of these hand parts and the hand changes from a right hand to a left hand. This last sentence is the key to how mirrors change right hands into left hands. Remember: mirrors reverse in and out. Hold your right hand up with the palm toward the mirror. The mirror image of your hand has the palm facing out, but the fingers are still pointing up and the thumb is on the same side as it was before — if your real thumb was pointing toward the trashcan, your mirror image thumb is pointing toward the trashcan. The only thing that has changed is the direction that the palm is facing, but that's enough to change your right hand into a left hand. What else can change a right hand into a left hand? To answer

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that question, take a look at that glove you were fooling with before. It's a right-handed glove. There is no way to rotate this glove in our space so that this right glove will fit onto your left hand. However, suppose the glove is thin and flexible enough — like the rubber gloves used for dishwashing or like the latex gloves used by doctors for less pleasant things. Then you can turn this right glove into a left one by turning it inside out. If you have a glove like the one we described, try this. Hold the glove with the fingers pointing up, the thumb pointing to the left, and the palm pointing away from you. Now, turn the glove inside out. The glove now fits a left hand. And it looks exactly like the mirror reflection of the original right-handed glove. Position this glove so that the thumb points to your left and the palm is away from you. To do this, you'll have to point the fingers down, rather than pointing them up. Once again, you've changed one direction to convert right into left.

PHYSICISTS' RULES

All this talk about swapping one direction and changing the "handedness" of a hand got Paul thinking about how physicists use this property of hands as a convenient tool for doing vector algebra. Physicists describe the world with three-dimensional coordinate systems placing x, y, and z axes at right angles to each other. There are two ways to assemble coordinate systems from these axes: one is called right-handed; the other, left-handed.

To see what a right-handed coordinate system looks like, hold out your right hand. If the x axis points along the extended fingers of your right hand and the y axis points out your palm, then the z axis will point along your thumb. To see what a left-handed coordinate system looks like, substitute your left hand. When Paul knows a law of physics uses a right-handed coordinate system he can hold up his right hand and remember how the axes go. (Incidentally, Paul notes that physics professors tend to be biased toward right-handed coordinate systems. This bias actually benefits left-handed students during exams. The lefties can do the vector algebra with their right hands and keep writing with their left hands.)

A TOPSY TURVY WORLD

At the Exploratorium, exhibits on the museum floor encourage people to ask questions about

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mirrors. After touring the exhibits, more than one visitor has ended up at Paul's office with the question he calls "the mirror question." That is, "why do mirrors reverse right left and not up down?" Paul helps them toward an answer (just as we have hopefully helped you in this column), explaining that mirrors actually reverse in and out. At the end of the talk, when visitors think they understand, Paul points to his ceiling, where he has mounted a large plastic mirror. In the ceiling mirror, objects in the room are turned upside down! Look at Paul's bookshelves on the wall over his desk. In the mirror, the desk appears above the bookshelves! When a floor or ceiling mirror reverses in and out it also reverses up and down.

FOR EXTRA CREDIT

Now that you have done the experiments and become an expert of right-left mirror reversal, here's another question for you. Does a mirror on the ceiling also reverse right and left? Good luck!

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Master fantasist and informal expert on hamster behavior Esther Friesner now offers us the mother of all evolution theories.

Sea-Section

By Esther M. Friesner

JUSTIN HOLDSTOCK FINALLY decided the hell with Doctor's Orders when he heard one of the attending obstetricians ask, "What *is* that in there? A lobster?"

Head up like a hound about to go on point, Justin did the unthinkable: He looked. Not just looked, but looked over the carefully erected barricade of sterile drapes that divided his wife Jennifer into the Amazing Talking Head on one side and No Man's Land on the other. S.O.P. for Caesarian sections, yes, a textile admonition to be respected (if not feared) by all law-abiding fathers-to-be who didn't want to find themselves either losing lunch or garnering an unscheduled nap on the O.R. floor. Marriage counselors were forever urging couples to open up to one another, but not like this.

But Bluebeard's wife had also been told not to look, Pandora had been forbidden to peek, and by the Great Horned Steinem, Justin Holdstock was no sexist. Besides, when a member in good standing of the medical profession is supposed to be birthing your firstborn and starts making crustacean-related comments, then the time for blind obedience is past.

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He looked. "That's not a lobster," he said, remarkably calm for a man who has just gotten a look at what makes his darling wifey tick (and tock, and swoosh, and lub-dub, and the whole symphony of internal plumbing). "That is a trilobite."

"A what?" the obstetrician asked. The one holding the still-squirming segmented body, that is.

"A trilobite," Justin repeated. "An extinct Paleozoic ancestor of modern *crustacea*. And," he added, "I fail to see why you are fooling around with such things when you're supposed to be birthing little Jeremiah." For the Holdstocks had gone to the technocave of the ultrasonic Sybil and there received assurance that all the auguries (and the fetoid wingle-dangle) pointed at this baby being a boy.

"*Mister* Holdstock," said the obstetrician, standing tall and aiming the trilobite at the plaintiff's heart. "*I* do not make a practice of smuggling lobsters into the O.R. Not to Caesarean sections, anyway, although sometimes when I have to perform a holistic hysterectomy I—" He made an exasperated noise and dropped the critter into a waiting stainless steel pan where it clanked around in a mournful manner. "The *point* is, I did not bring that thing in here; I found it in *there*." And his gore-bedewed rubber glove indicated the still-agape aperture of *la bonne femme* Holdstock.

"What?" Now Justin did show the first signs of an impending swoon. He wheeled violently from the doctor's dramatic *j'accuse* pose, planted both hands on the side of the operating table beside his wife's head and said, "Jennifer, what did you have for dinner last night?"

"Why do you want to know?" Jennie demanded petulantly. She was still nursing a grudge over the fact that she had wasted all those weeks going to LaMaze classes, hearing a bunch of bimbos in Birkenstocks rhapsodize over becoming *one* with the pain, only to wind up spreadeagled on this damn table, slit open like a tax refund, and stuck full of more diagnostic equipment than a Porsche getting a tune-up. Thanks to an excellent anesthesiologist she was becoming *one* with a whole lot of chemicals instead of her authentic womanhood. Now she'd have to take up ceramics instead. And to think her baby sister dropped those ugly brats of hers one-two-three, after maybe fifteen minutes of labor, like some refugee from a Pearl Buck novel!

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"Maybe you'd better show him the rest," the assisting obstetrician murmured.

"What rest?" Justin was on point again.

"Over here, sir," said a nurse at the foot of the table.

"*No,* dammit!" the chief ob-gyn cried, having as loud a hissy fit as a surgical mask would allow. "He is *not allowed* on this side of the drapes!"

"I demand to see what you're talking about!" Justin discovered that it was impossible for him to throw up and holler at the same time and resolved to use this knowledge. "This is my son we're talking about here, and if something's the matter — "

"What's the matter?" Jennifer yelled. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, dear," the nurse taking the head-end of the table cooed by rote. "You just relax."

" — I am going to *sue!*"

And there was silence in the O.R. for the space of a moment as the dreaded s-word worked its arcane sorcery.

"Oh, what the hell," the obstetrician said, shrugging green-gowned shoulders. "Let him see."

"Over here, sir," the nurse said, motioning for Justin to join her.

He did so slowly, cautiously, hoping that what he was about to see would not be too bloody. There was just so much you could ask of a man who's only had one cup of coffee. The nurse was still beckoning him. She stood before a table well removed from the Main Event. On it were arranged several stainless steel pans similar to the one which had received the trilobite. Justin looked into the first of these. Something with tentacles looked back.

"Squid," said the nurse. "Though damned if I know why it's stuck in that shell." Something oozed its way out from under the squid. "Snail," the nurse remarked. "There's some worms in there too, somewhere, and there was an ememonee — nannynemonee — an anemomonee — *an anem-o-ne,*" she articulated in triumph.

"And a starfish," Justin said, voice flatter than a chipmunk trying to cross the track at the Indy 500.

The nurse cast a sideways glance into the pan. "So it is."

"Nurse!" shouted the obstetrician. Something long and flippety-floppety was doing the hootchie-kootchie in his gloved hands. The nurse

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got one of the empty pans under it just in time. It twitched and writhed like a fish out of water, which it was, even if it looked eely in the extreme.

Next came the clams.

"What is going on here?" Justin bawled, or tried to. It came out at whimper-volume and soon dwindled to a piteous mewling.

"Uh," said the obstetrician, who had his hands full with the appearance of a fish who looked like he had robbed a sporting goods store of its entire supply of ping-pong paddles.

"Sir, what do you do for a living?" the assistant ob-gyn asked.

"I'm a commodities broker."

"And, um, you get a lot of exposure to radiation with that? Toxic chemicals? Known mutagens?"

"Only the *Wall Street Journal*. God damn it, *why* is this happening?"

Making one last valiant try in the name of Rational Cause, the assistant ob-gyn ignored the question in favor of inquiring, "Maybe you lived in New Jersey?"

"No! And we never lived near Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bikini Atoll, or any movie house running an all-night Godzilla marathon either! Now you tell me what this is all about!"

"Jesus Christ, how the fuck many legs does *this* thing have?" his harried colleague sighed from the region of South Jennifer. Something went *clang!* into a pan, then scrabble-scrabble-scrabble.

"Don't you *know* what's causing this?" Justin asked, his eyes narrow.

"Oh, well...." The very idea of being caught without a ready answer held a more primal terror for any medico worth his *sal volatile* than even the threat of a lawsuit. "It's probably all her fault," the assistant said.

"It is not!" Jennifer decreed. "Whatever it is, it isn't!"

In vain.

"I told you you should have had that pregnancy test earlier!" Justin snarled. Even though the doctor was currently scooping scorpions out of Jennifer's abdomen, Justin suddenly felt much better about the whole situation. Having someone he could blame for it all worked wonders. "God knows what you ate or drank or smoked or snorted during those critical first two weeks!"

"And God knows how you spent those critical first two years at Yale fucking up your germ plasm!" Jennifer countered fiercely. "Better living

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through chemistry my ass! Did you think you were made of mitochondria?"

"Unworthy vessel!"

"Semen third class!"

"I want a full investigation!" Justin told the room.

"I want a divorce," Jennifer announced from the far side of the drapes.

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," said the anesthesiologist, who was by nature and avocation a fairly laidback kinda gal.

"Huh?" said Jennifer.

"She means what goes around comes around," Justin said smugly. "I told you not to eat that third cheese straw at the Wilberforce's cocktail party, but would you listen? Oh, nooooo. I bet lab tests will prove this is all on account of excess calcium."

"That might explain the clams," said the chief obstetrician, "but not all these cockroaches. And the grunion."

"Keep going, I think I see a frog," said the nurse at his elbow.

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," the anesthesiologist repeated as if it were her mantra. "The biological development of the individual — in this case the human fetus — repeats or summarizes the evolutionary history of that individual. Which is why my cousin Eugene has gills; but then again, his mother came from Philadelphia."

"Yeah, that's right!" Jennifer cried. "The human embryo goes through different developmental stages where it looks like a fish, then an amphibian, then a reptile — "

"That'd be Cousin Bruce," the anesthesiologist supplied.

" — then a bird, and finally a mammal. It climbs the evolutionary ladder from lowest life-form to highest. I remember that from ninth grade biology!"

"So do I!" said the assistant ob-gyn brightly.

"But that's only supposed to happen in the embryo itself," Justin moaned. "What is it with this — this mob scene?"

"Eeeeee-yuck, I *hate* snakes," said the chief obstetrician, holding something at arm's length.

"Wimp," the nurse sneered, dropping it into a vacant pan.

The assistant shrugged. "Everything's committees these days."

A flight of doves startled everyone into silence, but the attendant

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pediatrician had the presence of mind to open the O.R. door and release them.

"We're getting closer, Mrs. Holdstock," the obstetrician said. He tried to keep it light and cheerful, but the sound of his teeth grinding was perfectly audible and even a little crunchy. "I think I've got hold of a lemur."

"Awwwwwww!" All previous hostilities were forgotten as the aforementioned creature was indeed produced, flooding the room with immense waves of ecologically correct adorability.

"Keep it away from the snake!" someone shouted.

The sight of the lemur with its large, intelligent, stereoptic eyes did something to Justin. Warm fuzzies begat warm fuzzies and he fled back to his assigned place on the North Jennifer side of the drapes. Holding his wife's hand — being careful of the IV feed, of course — he whispered to her, "Don't worry, darling, if they're up to lemurs, we'll be seeing little Jeremiah real soon now. Everything's gonna be all right."

"But what *happened* to me?" Jennifer insisted. "*How* did it happen? *Why*?" She sounded just like some of his clients when the market went yeek-crash-thoooooom.

"Honey, none of that matters," he purred in her ear. "All that matters now is — "

"It's a boy!" the obstetrician announced.

"*I'll* take that," the pediatrican said, swiftly and smoothly stepping into his proper role in the ordained scheme of things.

"*We'll* clean up," the nurses chirped as all the absent normalcies came clicking back into place.

"I'll just run some of this stuff down to the cafeteria, what say?" said a helpful orderly, gathering up the various fauna-filled trays and wheeling them out of the O.R. on a gurney. (The lemur was exempt — in this world you can be cute or you can be gumbo, but not both.)

" — that we get our version of this story to the networks first," Justin concluded.

"I love you, darling," said Jennifer, misty eyed. "And I want Geena Davis to play me."

"Uh-oh," said the chief obstetrician. He paused, sew-'er-up tools in hand, and stared at something that only he was positioned to see.

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"Is there some problem we can sue you for later, Doctor?" Justin asked calmly.

"You want to shake a suture there stitching me up?" Jennifer suggested. "I'd like to hold my son."

"Not...just...yet," he replied. His hands were trembling. He could not look away. His dreadful fascination was so compelling that, as happens at the site of all disasters, he soon drew a crowd. Within seconds Jennifer found herself all alone on the boring side of the drapes.

"What is it?" she clamored. "What's going on?"

"Oh...my...God." The nurse held her fingers to her lips — actually her rubber gloves to her mask.

"Possibly," the pediatrician conceded.

"Is that the head?"

"Are there five fingers on that hand?"

"*Is* that a hand?"

"Are those wings?"

"Can I keep the lemur?"

"Is it all right if we name her Julie if she's a girl and Jason if she's not?" asked Jennifer.

"Better make a third choice," the chief ob-gyn panted, up to his elbows in history. "Just to be sure."

"Is Darwinism covered by my medical insurance?" asked Justin.

"Ontogeny anticipates phylogeny," said the anesthesiologist.

And somewhere once more it was *Surf's up!* as the next wave broke on the shores of some dim, ancestral sea.

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M. John Harrison's last appearance in these pages was twenty-five years ago (in the January 1974 issue, if you're curious). He is probably best-known for his influential Viriconium fantasy stories, including The Pastel City *and* The Floating Gods. *His most recent novels are* The Course of the Heart *and* Signs of Life, *and he says he's working on a new one, entitled* Black Houses. *Additional projects include a short film written with director Simon Pummel, "Ray Gun Fun," due to air on British TV this summer.*

Harrison tends to write about people whose dreams lie just beyond their reach. The results, as in this tale of Virtual Reality, are hard-edged and harrowing.

Suicide Coast

By M. John Harrison

FOUR-THIRTY IN THE afternoon in a converted warehouse near Mile End underground station. Heavy, persistent summer rain was falling on the roof. Inside, the air was still and humid, dark despite the fluorescent lights. It smelled of sweat, dust, gymnasts' chalk. Twenty-five feet above the thick blue crash-mats, a boy with dreadlocks and baggy knee-length shorts was supporting his entire weight on two fingers of his right hand. The muscles of his upper back, black and shiny with sweat, fanned out exotically with the effort, like the hood of a cobra or the shell of a crab. One leg trailed behind him for balance. He had raised the other so that the knee was almost touching his chin. For two or three minutes he had been trying to get the ball of his foot in the same place as his fingers. Each time he moved, his center of gravity shifted and he had to go back to a resting position. Eventually he said quietly:

"I'm coming off."

We all looked up. It was a slow afternoon in Mile End. Nobody bothers

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much with training in the middle of summer. Some teenagers were in from the local schools and colleges. A couple of men in their late thirties had sneaked out of a civil engineering contract near Cannon Street. Everyone was tired. Humidity had made the handholds slippery. Despite that, a serious atmosphere prevailed.

"Go on," we encouraged him. "You can do it."

We didn't know him, or one another, from Adam.

"Go on!"

The boy on the wall laughed. He was good but not that good. He didn't want to fall off in front of everyone. An intention tremor moved through his bent leg. Losing patience with himself, he scraped at the foothold with the toe of his boot. He lunged upward. His body pivoted away from the wall and dropped onto the mats, which, absorbing the energy of the fall, made a sound like a badly winded heavyweight boxer. Chalk and dust billowed up. He got to his feet, laughing and shaking his dreadlocks.

"I can never do that."

"You'll get it in the end," I told him. "Me, I'm going to fall off this roof once more then fuck off home. It's too hot in here."

"See you, man."

I had spent most of that winter in London, assembling copy for MAX, a Web site that fronted the adventure sports software industry. They were always interested in stuff about cave diving, BASE jumping, snowboarding, hang-gliding, ATB and so on: but they didn't want to know about rock climbing.

"Not enough to buy," my editor said succinctly. "And too obviously skill-based." He leafed through my samples. "The punter needs equipment to invest in. It strengthens his self-image. With the machine parked in his hall, he believes he could disconnect from the software and still do the sport." He tapped a shot of Isobelle Patissier seven hundred feet up some knife-edge arete in Colorado. "Where's the hardware? These are just bodies."

"The boots are pretty high tech."

"Yeah? And how much a pair? Fifty, a hundred and fifty? Mick, we can get them to lay out three grand for the *frame* of an ATB."

He thought for a moment. Then he said: "We might do something with the women."

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"The good ones are French."

"Even better."

I gathered the stuff together and put it away.

"I'm off then," I said.

"You still got the 190?"

I nodded.

"Take care in that thing," he said.

"I will."

"Focke Wolf 190," he said. "Hey."

"It's a Mercedes," I said.

He laughed. He shook his head.

"Focke Wolf, Mercedes, no one drives themselves anymore," he said. "You mad fucker."

He looked round his office — a dusty metal desk, a couple of posters with the MAX logo, a couple of PCs. He said: "No one comes in here in person anymore. You ever hear of the modem?"

"Once or twice," I said.

"Well they've invented it now."

I looked around too.

"One day," I said, "the poor wankers are going to want back what you stole from them."

"Come on. They pissed it all away long before we arrived."

As I left the office he advised:

"Keep walking the walk, Mick."

I looked at my watch. It was late and the MAX premises were in EC1. But I thought that if I got a move on and cut up through Tottenham, I could go and see a friend of mine. His name was Ed and I had known him since the 1980s.

Back then, I was trying to write a book about people like him. Ed Johnson sounded interesting. He had done everything from roped-access engineering in Telford to harvesting birds' nests for soup in Southeast Asia. But he was hard to pin down. If I was in Birmingham, he was in Exeter. If we were both in London, he had something else to do. In the end it was Moscow Davis who made the introduction.

Moscow was a short, hard, cheerful girl with big feet and bedraggled

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hair. She was barely out of her teens. She had come from Oldham, I think, originally, and she had an indescribable snuffling accent. She and Ed had worked as steeplejacks together before they both moved down from the north in search of work. They had once been around a lot together. She thought Johnson would enjoy talking to me if I was still interested. I was. The arrangement we made was to be on the lookout for him in one of the Suicide Coast pubs, the Harbour Lights, that Sunday afternoon.

"Sunday afternoons are quiet, so we can have a chat," said Moscow. "Everyone's eating their dinner then."

We had been in the pub for half an hour when Johnson arrived, wearing patched 501s and a dirty T-shirt with a picture of a mole on the front of it. He came over to our table and began kicking morosely at the legs of Moscow's chair. The little finger of his left hand was splinted and wrapped in a wad of bandage.

"This is Ed," Moscow told me, not looking at him.

"Fuck off, Moscow," Ed told her, not looking at me. He scratched his armpit and stared vaguely into the air above Moscow's head. "I want my money back," he said. Neither of them could think of anything to add to this, and after a pause he wandered off.

"He's always like that," Moscow said. "You don't want to pay any attention." Later in the afternoon she said: "You'll get on well with Ed, though. You'll like him. He's a mad bastard."

"You say that about all the boys," I said.

In this case Moscow was right, because I had heard it not just from her, and later I would get proof of it anyway — if you can ever get proof of anything. Everyone said that Ed should be in a straightjacket. In the end, nothing could be arranged. Johnson was in a bad mood, and Moscow had to be up the Coast that week, on Canvey Island, to do some work on one of the cracking-plants there. There was always a lot of that kind of work, oil work, chemical work, on Canvey Island. "I haven't time for him," Moscow explained as she got up to go. "I'll see you later, anyway," she promised.

As soon as she was gone, Ed Johnson came back and sat down in front of me. He grinned. "Ever done anything worth doing in your whole life?" he asked me. "Anything real?"

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The MAX editor was right: since coring got popular, the roads had been deserted. I left EC1 and whacked the 190 up through Hackney until I got the Lea Valley reservoirs on my right like a splatter of moonlit verglas. On empty roads the only mistakes that need concern you are your own; every bend becomes a dreamy interrogation of your own technique. Life should be more like that. I made good time. Ed lived just back from Montagu Road, in a quiet street behind the Jewish Cemetery. He shared his flat with a woman in her early thirties whose name was Caitlin. Caitlin had black hair and soft, honest brown eyes. She and I were old friends. We hugged briefly on the doorstep. She looked up and down the street and shivered.

"Come in," she said. "It's cold."

"You should wear a jumper."

"I'll tell him you're here," she said. "Do you want some coffee?"

Caitlin had softened the edges of Ed's life, but less perhaps than either of them had hoped. His taste was still very minimal — white paint, ash floors, one or two items of furniture from Heals. And there was still a competition Klein mounted on the living room wall, its polished aerospace alloys glittering in the halogen lights.

"Espresso," I said.

"I'm not giving you espresso at this time of night. You'll explode."

"It was worth a try."

"Ed!" she called. "Ed! Mick's here!"

He didn't answer.

She shrugged at me, as if to say, "What can I do?" and went into the back room. I heard their voices but not what they were saying. After that she went upstairs. "Go in and see him," she suggested when she came down again three or four minutes later. "I told him you were here." She had pulled a Jigsaw sweater on over her Racing Green shirt and Levi's; and fastened her hair back hastily with a dark brown velvet scrunchy.

"That looks nice," I said. "Do you want me to fetch him out?"

"I doubt he'll come."

The back room was down a narrow corridor. Ed had turned it into a bleak combination of office and storage. The walls were done with one coat of what builders call "obliterating emulsion" and covered with metal shelves. Chipped diving tanks hollow with the ghosts of exotic gases were

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stacked by the filing cabinet. His BASE chute spilled half out of its pack, yards of cold nylon a vile but exciting rose color — a color which made you want to be hurtling downward face-first screaming with fear until you heard the canopy bang out behind you and you knew you weren't going to die that day (although you might still break both legs). The cheap beige carpet was strewn with high-access mess — hanks of graying static rope; a yellow bucket stuffed with tools; Ed's Petzl stop, harness and knocked-about CPTs. Everything was layered with dust. The radiators were turned off. There was a bed made up in one corner. Deep in the clutter on the cheap white desk stood a 5-gig Mac with a screen to design-industry specs. It was spraying Ed's face with icy blue light.

"Hi Ed."

"Hi Mick."

There was a long silence after that. Ed stared at the screen. I stared at his back. Just when I thought he had forgotten I was there, he said:

"Fuck off and talk to Caitlin a moment."

"I brought us some beer."

"That's great."

"What are you running here?"

"It's a game. I'm running a game, Mick."

Ed had lost weight since I last saw him. Though they retained their distinctive cabled structure, his forearms were a lot thinner. Without releasing him from anything it represented, the yoke of muscle had lifted from his shoulders. I had expected that. But I was surprised by how much flesh had melted off his face, leaving long vertical lines of sinew, fins of bone above the cheeks and at the corners of the jaw. His eyes were a long way back in his head. In a way it suited him. He would have seemed okay — a little tired perhaps; a little burned down, like someone who was working too hard — if it hadn't been for the light from the display. Hunched in his chair with that splashing off him, he looked like a vampire. He looked like a junkie.

I peered over his shoulder.

"You were never into this shit," I said.

He grinned.

"Everyone's into it now. Why not me? Wanking away and pretending it's sex."

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"Oh, come on."

He looked down at himself.

"It's better than living," he said.

There was no answer to that.

I went and asked Caitlin, "Has he been doing this long?"

"Not long," she said. "Have some coffee."

We sat in the L-shaped living area drinking decaffeinated Java. The sofa was big enough for Caitlin to curl up in a corner of it like a cat. She had turned the overhead lights off, tucked her bare feet up under her. She was smoking a cigarette. "It's been a bloody awful day," she warned me. "So don't say a word." She grinned wryly, then we both looked up at the Klein for a minute or two. Some kind of ambient music was issuing faintly from the stereo speakers, full of South American bird calls and bouts of muted drumming. "Is he winning?" she asked.

"He didn't tell me."

"You're lucky. It's all he ever tells me."

"Aren't you worried?" I said.

She smiled.

"He's still using a screen," she said. "He's not plugging in."

"Yet," I said.

"Yet," she agreed equably. "Want more coffee? Or will you do me a favor?"

I put my empty cup on the floor.

"Do you a favor," I said.

"Cut my hair."

I got up and went to her end of the sofa. She turned away from me so I could release her hair from the scrunchy. "Shake it," I said. She shook it. She ran her hands through it. Perfume came up; something I didn't recognize. "It doesn't need much," I said. I switched the overhead light back on and fetched a kitchen chair. "Sit here. No, right in the light. You'll have to take your jumper off."

"The good scissors are in the bathroom," she said.

Cut my hair. She had asked me that before, two or three days after she decided we should split up. I remembered the calm that came over me at the gentle, careful sound of the scissors, the way her hair felt as I lifted it away from the nape of her neck, the tenderness and fear because

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everything was changing around the two of us forever and somehow this quiet action signalized and blessed that. The shock of these memories made me ask:

"How are you two getting on?"

She lowered her head to help me cut. I felt her smile.

"You and Ed always liked the same kind of girls," she said.

"Yes," I said.

I finished the cut, then lightly kissed the nape of her neck. "There," I said. Beneath the perfume she smelled faintly of hypoallergenic soap and unscented deodorants. "No, Mick," she said softly. "Please." I adjusted the collar of her shirt, let her hair fall back round it. My hand was still on her shoulder. She had to turn her head at an awkward angle to look up at me. Her eyes were wide and full of pain. "Mick." I kissed her mouth and brushed the side of her face with my fingertips. Her arms went round my neck, I felt her settle in the chair. I touched her breasts. They were warm, the cotton shirt was clean and cool. She made a small noise and pulled me closer. Just then, in the back room among the dusty air tanks and disused parachutes, Ed Johnson fell out of his chair and began to thrash about, the back of his head thudding rhythmically on the floor.

Caitlin pushed me away.

"Ed?" she called, from the passage door.

"Help!" cried Ed.

"I'll go," I said.

Caitlin put her arm across the doorway and stared up at me calmly.

"No," she said.

"How can you lift him on your own?"

"This is me and Ed," she said.

"For God's sake!"

"It's late, Mick. I'll let you out, then I'll go and help him."

At the front door I said:

"I think you're mad. Is this happening a lot? You're a fool to let him do this."

"It's his life."

I looked at her. She shrugged.

"Will you be all right?" I said.

When I offered to kiss her goodbye, she turned her face away.

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"Fuck off then, both of you," I said.

I knew which game Ed was playing, because I had seen the software wrapper discarded on the desk near his Mac. Its visuals were cheap and schematic, its values self-consciously retro. It was nothing like the stuff we sold off the MAX site, which was quite literally the experience itself, stripped of its consequences. You had to plug in for that: you had to be cored. This was just a game; less a game, even, than a trip. You flew a silvery V-shaped graphic down an endless V-shaped corridor, a notional perspective sometimes bounded by lines of objects, sometimes just by lines, sometimes bounded only by your memory of boundaries. Sometimes the graphic floated and mushed like a moth. Sometimes it traveled in flat vicious arcs at an apparent Mach 5. There were no guns, no opponent. There was no competition. You flew. Sometimes the horizon tilted one way, sometimes the other. You could choose your own music. It was a bleakly minimal experience. But after a minute or two, five at the most, you felt as if you could fly your icon down the perspective forever, to the soundtrack of your own life.

It was quite popular.

It was called *Out There*.

"Rock climbing is theater," I once wrote.

It had all the qualities of theater, I went on, but a theater-in-reverse:

"In obedience to some devious vanished script, the actors abandon the stage and begin to scale the seating arrangements, the balconies and hanging boxes now occupied only by cleaning-women."

"Oh, very deep," said Ed Johnson when he read this. "Shall I tell you what's wrong here? Eh? Shall I tell you?"

"Piss off, Ed."

"If you fall on your face from a hundred feet up, it comes off the front of your head *and you don't get a second go*. Next to that, theater is wank. Theater is flat. Theater is *Suicide Coast*."

Ed hated anywhere flat. "Welcome to the Suicide Coast," he used to say when I first knew him. To start with, that had been because he lived in Canterbury. But it had quickly become his way of describing most places, most experiences. You didn't actually have to be near the sea. Suicide Coast syndrome had caused Ed to do some stupid things in his

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time. One day, when he and Moscow still worked in roped-access engineering together, they were going up in the lift to the top of some shitty council highrise in Birmingham or Bristol, when suddenly Ed said:

"Do you bet me I can keep the doors open with my head?"

"What?"

"Next floor! When the doors start to close, do you bet me I can stop them with my head?"

It was Monday morning. The lift smelled of piss. They had been hand-ripping mastic out of expansion joints for two weeks, using Stanley knives. Moscow was tired, hung over, weighed down by a collection of CPTs, mastic guns and hundred-foot coils of rope. Her right arm was numb from repeating the same action hour after hour, day after day.

"Fuck off, Ed," she said.

But she knew Ed would do it whether she took the bet or not.

TWO OR THREE days after she first introduced me to Ed, Moscow telephoned me. She had got herself a couple of weeks cutting out on Thamesmead Estate. "They don't half work hard, these fuckers," she said. We talked about that for a minute or two then she asked:

"Well?"

"Well what, Moscow?"

"Ed. Was he what you were looking for, then? Or what?"

I said that though I was impressed I didn't think I would be able to write anything about Ed.

"He's a mad fucker, though, isn't he?"

"Oh he is," I said. "He certainly is."

The way Moscow said "isn't he" made it sound like "innie."

Another thing I once wrote:

"Climbing takes place in a special kind of space, the rules of which are simple. You must be able to see immediately what you have to lose; and you must choose the risk you take."

What do I know?

I know that a life without consequences isn't a life at all. Also, if you want to do something difficult, something real, you can't shirk the pain.

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What I learned in the old days, from Ed and Moscow, from Gabe King, Justine Townsend and all the others who taught me to climb rock or jump off buildings or stay the right way up in a tube of pitch-dark water two degrees off freezing and two hundred feet under the ground, was that you can't just plug in and be a star: you have to practice. You have to keep loading your fingers until the tendons swell.

So it's back to the Mile End wall, with its few thousand square feet of board and bolt-on holds, its few thousand cubic meters of emphysemic air through which one very bright ray of sun sometimes falls in the middle of the afternoon, illuminating nothing much at all. Back to the sound of the fan heater, the dust-filled Akai radio playing some mournful aggressive thing, and every so often a boy's voice saying softly, "Oh shit," as some sequence or other fails to work out. You go back there, and if you have to fall off the same ceiling move thirty times in an afternoon, that's what you do. The mats give their gusty wheeze, chalk dust flies up, the fan heater above the Monkey House door rattles and chokes and flatlines briefly before puttering on.

"Jesus Christ. I don't know why I do this."

Caitlin telephoned me.

"Come to supper," she said.

"No," I said.

"Mick, why?"

"Because I'm sick of it."

"Sick of what?"

"You. Me. Him. Everything."

"Look," she said, "he's sorry about what happened last time."

"Oh, *he's* sorry."

"We're both sorry, Mick."

"All right, then: I'm sorry, too."

There was a gentle laugh at the other end.

"So you should be."

I went along all the deserted roads and got there at about eight, to find a brand-new motorcycle parked on the pavement outside the house. It was a Kawasaki *Ninja*. Its fairing had been removed, to give it the look of a '60s café racer, but no one was fooled. Even at a glance it appeared too hunched,

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too short-coupled: too knowing. The remaining plastics shone with their own harsh inner light.

Caitlin met me on the doorstep. She put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me. "Mm," she said. She was wearing white tennis shorts and a soft dark blue sweatshirt.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," I said.

She smiled and pushed me away.

"My hands smell of garlic," she said.

Just as we were going inside, she turned back and nodded at the Kawa.

"That thing," she said.

"It's a motorcycle, Caitlin."

"It's his."

I stared at her.

"Be enthusiastic," she said. "Please."

"But — "

"Please?"

THE MAIN COURSE was penne with mushrooms in an olive and tomato sauce. Ed had cooked it, Caitlin said, but she served. Ed pushed his chair over to the table and rubbed his hands. He picked his plate up and passed it under his nose. "Wow!" he said. As we ate, we talked about this and that. The Kawa was behind everything we said, but Ed wouldn't mention it until I did. Caitlin smiled at us both. She shook her head as if to say: "Children! You children!" It was like Christmas, and she was the parent. The three of us could feel Ed's excitement and impatience. He grinned secretively. He glanced up from his food at one or both of us; quickly back down again. Finally, he couldn't hold back any longer.

"What do you think, then?" he said. "What do you think, Mick?"

"I think this is good pasta," I said. "For a cripple."

He grinned and wiped his mouth.

"It's not bad," he said, "is it?"

"I think what I like best is the way you've let the mushrooms take up a touch of sesame oil."

"Have some more. There's plenty."

"That's new to me in Italian food," I said. "Sesame oil."

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Ed drank some more beer.

"It was just an idea," he said.

"You children," said Caitlin. She shook her head. She got up and took the plates away. "There's ice cream for pudding," she said over her shoulder just before she disappeared. When I was sure she was occupied in the kitchen I said:

"Nice idea, Ed: a *motor*cycle. What are you going to do with it? Hang it on the wall with the Klein?"

He drank the rest of his beer, opened a new one and poured it thoughtfully into his glass. He watched the bubbles rising through it, then grinned at me as if he had made a decision. He had. In that moment I saw that he was lost, but not what I could do about it.

"Isn't it brilliant? Isn't it just a *fucker*, that bike? I haven't had a bike since I was seventeen. There's a story attached to that."

"Ed — "

"Do you want to hear it or not?"

Caitlin came back in with the ice cream and served it out to us and sat down.

"Tell us, Ed," she said tiredly. "Tell us the story about that."

Ed held onto his glass hard with both hands and stared into it for a long time as if he was trying to see the past there. "I had some ace times on bikes when I was a kid," he said finally: "but they were always someone else's. My old dear — She really hated bikes, my old dear. You know: they were dirty, they were dangerous, she wasn't going to have one in the house. Did that stop me? It did not. I bought one of the first good Ducatti 125s in Britain, *but I had to keep it in a coal cellar down the road.*"

"That's really funny, Ed."

"Fuck off, Mick. I'm seventeen, I'm still at school, and I've got this fucking *projectile* stashed in someone's coal cellar. The whole time I had it, the old dear never knew. I'm walking three miles in the piss wet rain every night, dressed to go to the library, then unlocking this thing and *stuffing* it round the back lanes with my best white shortie raincoat ballooning up like a fucking tent."

He looked puzzledly down at his plate.

"What's this? Oh. Ice cream. Ever ridden a bike in a raincoat?" he asked Caitlin.

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Caitlin shook her head. She was staring at him with a hypnotized expression; she was breaking wafers into her ice cream.

"Well they were all the rage then," he said.

He added: "The drag's enormous."

"Eat your pudding, Ed," I said. "And stop boasting. How fast would a 125 go in those days? Eighty miles an hour? Eighty-five?"

"They went faster if you ground your teeth, Mick," Ed said. "Do you want to hear the rest?"

"Of course I want to hear it, Ed."

"Walk three miles in the piss-wet rain," said Ed, "to go for a ride on a motorbike, what a joke. But the real joke is this: the fucker had an alloy crank-case. That was a big deal in those days, an alloy crank-case. The first time I dropped it on a bend, it cracked. Oil everywhere. I pushed it back to the coal-house and left it there. You couldn't weld an alloy crank-case worth shit in those days. I had three years' payments left to make on a bunch of scrap."

He grinned at us triumphantly.

"Ask me how long I'd had it," he ordered.

"How long, Mick?"

"Three weeks. I'd had the fucker three weeks."

He began to laugh. Suddenly, his face went so white it looked green. He looked rapidly from side to side, like someone who can't understand where he is. At the same time, he pushed himself up out of the wheelchair until his arms wouldn't straighten any further and he was almost standing up. He tilted his head back until the tendons in his neck stood out. He shouted, "I want to get out of here! Caitlin, I want to get out!" Then his arms buckled and he let his weight go onto his feet and his legs folded up like putty and he fell forward with a gasp, his face in the ice cream and his hands smashing and clutching and scraping at anything they touched on the dinner table until he had bunched the cloth up under him and everything was a sodden mess of food and broken dishes, and he had slipped out of the chair and on to the floor. Then he let himself slump and go quite still.

"Help me," said Caitlin.

We couldn't get him back into the chair. As we tried, his head flopped forward, and I could see quite clearly the bruises and deep, half-healed scabs at the base of his skull, where they had cored his cervical spine for

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the computer connection. When he initialized *Out There* now, the graphics came up live in his head. No more screen. Only the endless V of the perspective. The endless, effortless dip-and-bank of the viewpoint. What did he see out there? Did he see himself, hunched up on the Kawasaki *Ninja*? Did he see highways, bridges, tunnels, weird motorcycle flights through endless space?

Halfway along the passage, he woke up.

"Caitlin!" he shouted.

"I'm here."

"Caitlin!"

"I'm here, Ed."

"Caitlin, I never did any of that."

"Hush, Ed. Let's get you to bed."

"Listen!" he shouted. "*Listen.*"

He started to thrash about and we had to lay him down where he was. The passage was so narrow his head hit one wall, then the other, with a solid noise. He stared desperately at Caitlin, his face smeared with Ben & Jerry's. "I never could ride a bike," he admitted. "I made all that up."

She bent down and put her arms round his neck.

"I know," she said.

"I made all that up!" he shouted.

"It's all right. It's all right."

We got him into bed in the back room. She wiped the ice-cream off his face with a Kleenex. He stared over her shoulder at the wall, rigid with fear and self-loathing. "Hush," she said. "You're all right." That made him cry; him crying made her cry. I didn't know whether to cry or laugh. I sat down and watched them for a moment, then got to my feet. I felt tired.

"It's late," I said. "I think I'll go."

Caitlin followed me out onto the doorstep. It was another cold night. Condensation had beaded on the fuel tank of the Kawasaki, so that it looked like some sort of frosted confection in the streetlight.

"Look," she said, "can you do anything with that?"

I shrugged.

"It's still brand new," I said. I drew a line in the condensation, along the curve of the tank; then another, at an angle to it.

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"I could see if the dealer would take it back."

"Thanks."

I laughed.

"Go in now," I advised her. "It's cold."

"Thanks, Mick. Really."

"That's what you always say."

THE WAY ED GOT his paraplegia was this. It was a miserable January about four months after Caitlin left me to go and live with him. He was working over in mid-Wales with Moscow Davis. They had landed the inspection contract for three point-blocks owned by the local council; penalty clauses meant they had to complete that month. They lived in a bed-and-breakfast place a mile from the job, coming back so tired in the evening that they just about had time to eat fish and chips and watch *Coronation Street* before they fell asleep with their mouths open. "We were too fucked even to take drugs," Ed admitted afterward, in a kind of wonder. "Can you imagine that?" Their hands were bashed and bleeding from hitting themselves with sample hammers in the freezing rain. At the end of every afternoon the sunset light caught a thin, delicate layer of water-ice that had welded Moscow's hair to her cheek. Ed wasn't just tired, he was missing Caitlin. One Friday he said, "I'm fucked off with this, let's have a weekend at home."

"We agreed we'd have to work weekends," Moscow reminded him. She watched a long string of snot leave her nose, stretch out like spider-silk, then snap and vanish on the wind. "To finish in time," she said.

"Come on, you wanker," Ed said. "Do something real in your life."

"I never wank," said Moscow. "I can't fancy myself."

They got in her 1984 320i with the M-Technic pack, Garrett turbo and extra wide wheels, and while the light died out of a bad afternoon she pushed it eastward through the Cambrians, letting the rear end hang out on corners. She had Lou Reed *Retro* on the CD and her plan was to draw a line straight across the map and connect with the M4 at the Severn Bridge. It was ghostly and fog all the way out of Wales that night, lost sheep coming at you from groups of wet trees and folds in the hills. "Tregaron to Abergwesyn. One of the great back roads!" Moscow shouted over the

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music, as they passed a single lonely house in the rain, miles away from anywhere, facing south into the rolling moors of mid-Wales.

Ed shouted back: "They can go faster than this, these 320s." So on the next bend she let the rear end hang out an inch too far and they surfed five hundred feet into a ravine below Cefn Coch, with the BMW crumpled up round them like a chocolate wrapper. Just before they went over, the tape had got to "Sweet Jane" — the live version with the applause welling up across the opening chords as if God himself was stepping out on stage. In the bottom of the ravine a shallow stream ran through pressure-metamorphosed Ordovician shale. Ed sat until daylight the next morning, conscious but unable to move, watching the water hurry toward him and listening to Moscow die of a punctured lung in the heavy smell of fuel. It was a long wait. Once or twice she regained consciousness and said: "I'm sorry, Ed."

Once or twice he heard himself reassure her, "No, it was my fault."

At Southwestern Orthopaedic a consultant told him that key motor nerves had been ripped out of his spine.

"Stuff the fuckers back in again then!" he said, in an attempt to impress her.

She smiled.

"That's exactly what we're going to try," she replied. "We'll do a tuck-and-glue and encourage the spinal cord to send new filaments into the old cable channel."

She thought for a moment.

"We'll be working very close to the cord itself," she warned him.

Ed stared at her.

"It was a joke," he said.

For a while it seemed to work. Two months later he could flex the muscles in his upper legs. But nothing more happened; and, worried that a second try would only make the damage worse, they had to leave it.

Mile End Monkey House. Hanging upside down from a painful foothook, you chalk your hands meditatively, staring at the sweaty triangular mark your back left on the blue plastic cover of the mat last time you fell on it. Then, reluctantly, feeling your stomach muscles grind as they curl you upright again, you clutch the starting holds and go for the move: reach

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up: lock out on two fingers: let your left leg swing out to rebalance: strain upward with your right fingertips, and just as you brush the crucial hold, fall off again.

"Jesus Christ. I don't know why I come here."

You come so that next weekend you can get into a Cosworth-engined Merc 190E and drive very fast down the M4 ("No one drives themselves anymore!") to a limestone outcrop high above the Wye Valley. Let go here and you will not land on a blue safety mat in a puff of chalk dust. Instead you will plummet eighty feet straight down until you hit a small ledge, catapult out into the trees, and land a little later face-first among moss-grown boulders flecked with sunshine. Now all the practice is over. Now you are on the route. Your friends look up, shading their eyes against the white glare of the rock. They are wondering if you can make the move. So are you. The only exit from shit creek is to put two fingers of your left hand into a razor-sharp solution pocket, lean away from it to the full extent of your arm, run your feet up in front of you, and, just as you are about to fall off, lunge with your right hand for the good hold above.

At the top of the cliff grows a large yew tree. You can see it very clearly. It has a short horizontal trunk, and contorted limbs perhaps eighteen inches thick curving out over the drop as if they had just that moment stopped moving. When you reach it you will be safe. But at this stage on a climb, the top of anything is an empty hypothesis. You look up: it might as well be the other side of the Atlantic. All that air is burning away below you like a fuse. Suddenly you're moving anyway. Excitement has short-circuited the normal connections between intention and action. Where you look, you go. No effort seems to be involved. It's like falling upward. It's like that moment when you first understood how to swim, or ride a bike. Height and fear have returned you to your childhood. Just as it was then, your duty is only to yourself. Until you get safely down again, contracts, business meetings, household bills, emotional problems will mean nothing.

When you finally reach that yew tree at the top of the climb, you find it full of grown men and women wearing faded shorts and T-shirts. They are all in their forties and fifties. They have all escaped. With their bare brown arms, their hair bleached out by weeks of sunshine, they sit at every fork or junction, legs dangling in the dusty air, like child-pirates out of

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some storybook of the 1920s: an investment banker from Greenwich, an AIDS counselor from Bow; a designer of French Connection clothes; a publishers' editor. There is a comfortable silence broken by the odd friendly murmur as you arrive, but their eyes are inturned and they would prefer to be alone, staring dreamily out over the valley, the curve of the river, the woods which seem to stretch away to Tintern Abbey and then Wales. This is the other side of excitement, the other pleasure of height: the space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space without anxiety. The space with —

You are left with this familiar glitch or loop in the MAXware. *Suicide Coast* won't play any farther. Reluctantly, you abandon Mick to his world of sad acts, his faith that reality can be relied upon to scaffold his perceptions. To run him again from the beginning would only make the frailty of that faith more obvious. So you wait until everything has gone black, unplug yourself from the machine, and walk away, unconsciously rolling your shoulders to ease the stiffness, massaging the sore place at the back of your neck. What will you do next? Everything is flat out here. No one drives themselves anymore.

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The Mayor of Lud-in-the-Mist, Nat Chanticleer, is less prosaic than he would have others believe. Without his knowledge, his young son, Ranulph, has been fed fairy fruit.

Now the fairy world — which is also the world of the dead — begins to claim the town: a puck spirits away the lovely young ladies of Miss Crabapple's Academy for Young Ladies; Chanticleer stumbles upon the fruit smugglers, and is framed for smuggling; Duke Aubrey is sighted; old murders will out; and, in the end, Chanticleer must cross the Elfin Marches to rescue his son.

The book begins as a travelogue or a history, becomes a pastorale, a low comedy, a high comedy, a ghost story and a detective story. The writing is elegant, supple, effective and haunting: the author demands a great deal from her readers, which she repays many times over.

This is a book about reconciliation — the balancing and twining of the mundane and the miraculous. We need both, after all. It is a little golden miracle of a book, adult, in the best sense, and, as the best fantasy should be, far from reassuring.

—Neil Gaiman

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